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Contents

Emily Shadowhunter
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26

Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 1 – book 2: WOLF MAN
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26

Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Emily Shadowhunter - Book 3: BITTEN
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21

Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 1 – Book 4: DAYWALKER
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24

Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Book 5
CHAPTER 1
CHAPTER 2
CHAPTER 3
CHAPTER 4
CHAPTER 5
CHAPTER 6
CHAPTER 7
CHAPTER 8
CHAPTER 9
CHAPTER 10
CHAPTER 11
CHAPTER 12
CHAPTER 13
CHAPTER 14
CHAPTER 15
CHAPTER 16
CHAPTER 17
CHAPTER 18

CHAPTER 19
CHAPTER 20
CHAPTER 21
CHAPTER 22
CHAPTER 23
CHAPTER 24
CHAPTER 25
CHAPTER 26
CHAPTER 27
CHAPTER 28
CHAPTER 29
CHAPTER 30
CHAPTER 31
CHAPTER 32
CHAPTER 33
CHAPTER 34
CHAPTER 35
CHAPTER 36
CHAPTER 37
CHAPTER 38
CHAPTER 39
CHAPTER 40
CHAPTER 41
CHAPTER 42
CHAPTER 43
CHAPTER 44
CHAPTER 45
CHAPTER 46
CHAPTER 47
CHAPTER 48
CHAPTER 49
CHAPTER 50
CHAPTER 51
CHAPTER 52
CHAPTER 53

CHAPTER 54
CHAPTER 55
Book 6 DOMINATION
CHAPTER 1
CHAPTER 2
CHAPTER 3
CHAPTER 4
CHAPTER 5
CHAPTER 6
CHAPTER 7
CHAPTER 8
CHAPTER 9
CHAPTER 10
CHAPTER 11
CHAPTER 12
CHAPTER 13
CHAPTER 14
CHAPTER 15
CHAPTER 16
CHAPTER 17
CHAPTER 18
CHAPTER 19
CHAPTER 20
CHAPTER 21
CHAPTER 22
CHAPTER 23
CHAPTER 24
CHAPTER 25
CHAPTER 26
CHAPTER 27
CHAPTER 28
CHAPTER 29
CHAPTER 30
CHAPTER 31
CHAPTER 32

CHAPTER 33
CHAPTER 33
CHAPTER 34
CHAPTER 35
CHAPTER 36
CHAPTER 37
CHAPTER 38
CHAPTER 39
CHAPTER 40
CHAPTER 41
CHAPTER 42
CHAPTER 43
CHAPTER 44
CHAPTER 45
CHAPTER 46
Book 7 REVOLUTION
CHAPTER 1
CHAPTER 2
CHAPTER 3
CHAPTER 4
CHAPTER 5
CHAPTER 6
CHAPTER 7
CHAPTER 8
CHAPTER 9
CHAPTER 10
CHAPTER 11
CHAPTER 12
CHAPTER 13
CHAPTER 14
CHAPTER 15
CHAPTER 16
CHAPTER 17
CHAPTER 18
CHAPTER 19

CHAPTER 20
CHAPTER 21
CHAPTER 22
CHAPTER 23
CHAPTER 24
CHAPTER 25
CHAPTER 26
CHAPTER 27
CHAPTER 28
CHAPTER 29
CHAPTER 30
CHAPTER 31
CHAPTER 32
CHAPTER 33
CHAPTER 34
CHAPTER 35
CHAPTER 36
CHAPTER 37
CHAPTER 38
CHAPTER 39
CHAPTER 40
CHAPTER 41
CHAPTER 42
CHAPTER 43
CHAPTER 44
CHAPTER 45
CHAPTER 46
CHAPTER 46
Book 8 CONFLICT
CHAPTER 1
CHAPTER 2
CHAPTER 3
CHAPTER 4
CHAPTER 5
CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 7
CHAPTER 8
CHAPTER 9
CHAPTER 10
CHAPTER 11
CHAPTER 12
CHAPTER 13
CHAPTER 14
CHAPTER 15
CHAPTER 16
CHAPTER 17
CHAPTER 18
CHAPTER 19
CHAPTER 20
CHAPTER 21
CHAPTER 22
CHAPTER 23
CHAPTER 24
CHAPTER 25
CHAPTER 26
CHAPTER 27
CHAPTER 28
CHAPTER 29
CHAPTER 30
CHAPTER 31
CHAPTER 32
CHAPTER 33
CHAPTER 34
CHAPTER 35
CHAPTER 36
CHAPTER 37
CHAPTER 38
CHAPTER 39
CHAPTER 40
CHAPTER 41

CHAPTER 42
CHAPTER 43
CHAPTER 44
CHAPTER 45
CHAPTER 45
CHAPTER 46
CHAPTER 47
CHAPTER 48
CHAPTER 49
CHAPTER 50

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Emily Shadowhunter OMNIBUS

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Emily Shadowhunter

Book 1: VAMPIRE KILLER

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Chapter 1

It was not the first time that Emily had flown. In fact it was not even the first time that she had flown First Class. Not that she was from a super- privileged background or anything. Well, she probably was, way back when. She had lived in a Malibu mansion and her parents had been a couple of real international jet setter types.

So Emily had done a lot of traveling. Not so much with her parents but with her rich friends and, most often, with paid companions. Ski instructors, diving instructors. Even flying instructors.

That had all stopped when her parents died. When she was eleven years old.

Her mom and dad had never spent that much face time with her. She used to think that was because they simply weren't cut out to be hands on parent types. They were high-flyers and international-party-goers, as opposed to bed-time- story tellers and school-play-watchers.

She had been wrong. There had been nothing that they had wanted more than to tuck her in at night and read her stories about bears that go shopping. Or have family take out night, eat pizza and rent bad horror movies.

But while some parents are allowed that freedom, others are tied to a higher, selfless purpose.

After their deaths, Emily had been taken in by a pair of family friends. She had known them the whole of her short life and, whilst she did not see them that often, she liked them both and was happy to go with them.

Not that there was any choice.

'Excuse me, ma'am,' the air hostess interrupted her reverie. 'We're about to take off. Please could you fasten your seat belt and put your chair in the upright position.'

Emily nodded, smiled, complied and then let her mind slip back into the past.

They had never officially fostered Emily and she had never thought of them as mom and dad. But she had felt close to them. As close as they had allowed her to feel, as they often came across more as tutors than as family.

Bartholomew and Ryoko Johnson. Both were in their mid forties. Ryoko had been born in Japan. She was small, neat and quiet. He was the polar opposite. A big man, in both voice and stature. Long unkempt hair and beard, bright, deep-blue eyes. Muscles like burlap bags stuffed with eels.

The biggest shock was that she had been moved to Alaska. A pampered Malibu princess, torn from her mild and sunny comfort zone to a state often referred to as 'The Last Frontier'. The wild land mass where the population density was less than one person per square mile and the temperature was known to drop to minus twenty eight degrees.

The reason that Bart and Ryoko lived in Alaska was because they were both rabid 'Preppers'. They preferred to call themselves 'Survivalists' but it came down to the same thing – they were thoroughly prepared for the Big One. Whether that took place as a nuclear holocaust, a worldwide viral outbreak or an alien invasion, a good Prepper was ready for anything. With a stout underground bunker, enough dried food and water for two years survival, an armory capable of supplying a full scale private war and all of the necessary skills – Bart and Ryoko were at the top of the

game.

When Emily had asked Bartholomew what he thought was going to go wrong, he laughed out loud and replied – 'Darling, don't you know? It's already happened.'

She hadn't bothered to ask him again. 'Champagne or freshly squeezed orange juice?' asked the hostess, dragging Emily once more from her cogitation.

Emily thought a bit before she answered. Technically, the American liquor laws stated that she was still underage. But then she was going to England and apparently the legal age for drink there was eighteen. So, after a few seconds of internal debate she decided that she had better get some practice in before she arrived.

'Champagne, please.'

The golden drink cascaded into her crystal flute, the bubbles rising and spinning and picking up the white of the overhead cabin lights as it did so.

She took a sip. The effervescence tickled her nose. It was tart and sweet at the same time. Like grape soda that had gone off. She shrugged, took another sip, decided that it was a bit meh and put it down.

When she had first arrived in Alaska she had made the mistake of thinking of Bart and Ryoko as country hicks. Good solid people who loved the flag, guns and apple pie in equal measure. It didn't take her long to discover her mistake.

Bart was actually a professor of philosophy from New York University, he was also an ex- marine and a weapons and tracking expert.

Ryoko, who had been born in Hinohara outside Tokyo, Japan, was a third dan black belt in Kung Fu and Jiu Jitsu, as well as a being a graduate of Cal Tech in applied mathematics. The Japanese woman was almost the diametric opposite of Emily who was tall, blonde, blue eyed and just curvy enough to attract attention. Ryoko was tiny, dark haired, serious and thin to the point of androgyny.

Due to the remoteness of the area, Emily had been home schooled by her two foster parents and, as such, had achieved a post-graduate level of education in both mathematics and philosophy by the time she was seventeen. She had also achieved her second level black belt in Kung Fu and her first dan in Jiu Jistu. She could achieve minute-of-angle shooting with a rifle and was a qualified Master Rank with a handgun. She could track a variety of animals through any weather and terrain, live off the land, speak both Latin and ancient Greek and bake a perfect cheese soufflé nine times out of ten.

However, she was guilty of biting her nails and tended to stand with a bit of a stoop, almost as if she were embarrassed at her slightly above average height.

But then she never claimed to be perfect. In fact, Emily never claimed to be anything. She had no yardstick against which to measure herself. And her infrequent visits to Anchorage did not allow her any time for either socializing or comparing herself to others.

In fact, Emily would have considered herself to be pretty normal.

Until she turned eighteen. Only yesterday.

Already it seemed so long ago…

…*Bart woke her even earlier than was usual in the Johnson household.* A knock on the door, a cup of coffee, a brisk Happy Birthday darling and a request to join him and Ryoko in the kitchen as soon as she was ready.

She showered and changed into her usual two- piece black kung fu suit and canvas shoes. Comfortable, practical clothing. Neither Ryoko nor Bart believed in frivolous fashion and, truth be told, Emily did hanker after a wardrobe full of girly clothes. Designer outfits, branded jeans and shoes worn for looks rather than practicality.

She walked into the kitchen and both of her foster parents where there, waiting for her. Bart gave her a hug and then Ryoko did the same but she held on to Emily for a good minute, which was unusual as she wasn't normally a demonstrative person at all.

Finally she stood back and handed Emily a small box that she had tied with a ribbon. Emily opened it to reveal a silver necklace. The chain made up of three delicate strands that had been plaited together. Hanging from it, a carved Japanese symbol in jade. She slid it over her head.

'It's beautiful,' she said appreciatively. 'Thank you.'

Ryoko smiled at her. 'It has been in our family for over one thousand years. Passed down from mother to daughter in an unbroken line.'

Emily held up the jade symbol. 'What does this say?'

'It is hard to translate into the western tongue,' the small Japanese woman answered. 'But if one had to try, I suppose one could say – "The Brightest Flame Casts the Deepest Shadow". It is all about Ying and Yang. Those of us who are capable of the best of deeds are also capable of the darkest. It is both a message of warning and an amulet of protection against the darkness. Wear it always.'

'I will,' Emily responded.

'Right, my girl,' interjected Bart. 'Look, there's something that we have to tell you.' He looked pensive when he spoke. Unsure of himself. Which was an expression that Emily had never seen before on the big man's face. There was a long awkward silence and then eventually he said.

'You know what; it's easier to simply show you. Come on, let's go to the dojo.'

The three of them traipsed through the house and into the dojo, a large open room with sprung wooden floors and a series of punch bags and *makiwara* punching boards along the one wall.

Bart grabbed two blocks of wood and laid them down next to each other, then he placed a concrete roof tile across them.

Emily knew what that was for. She had practiced her knife-hand strike until she was capable of breaking a roof tile with her bare hand. Once she had managed to break two. Only once.

But Bart continued to pile more tiles on. Two. Three. Four, five. Ten.

Then he stopped.

'Break them,' he instructed.

Emily shook her head. 'No way.'

'Way,' urged Bart. 'Trust me, my girl. You can do it.'

Emily glanced at Ryoko for support but the petite Asian woman simply nodded her agreement and pointed at the vast mountain of tiles. 'You can do it,' she repeated. 'See it happening. Envisage it. And then make it happen.'

Emily didn't want to disappoint her foster parents so she stepped forward, stood in front of the ludicrously high pile of concrete, composed herself and struck.

The tiles simply exploded. Every one broke into at least five pieces.

Emily squealed in shock and jumped backwards like she had been bitten.

Both Bart and Ryoko smiled.

But their smiles were tinged with another expression. Acceptance. And perhaps sadness.

Emily didn't notice, such was her shock at what she had just achieved.

'Umm…there's more,' said Bart, almost apologetically. 'Come,' he led Emily to the window. 'Can you see that? Nailed to the tree over there on the horizon.' He pointed at an A4 piece of paper, nailed to a tree some one thousand and seventy two yards away. Bart knew the exact distance because he had paced it out that morning.

Emily nodded. 'Yep. Just.'

'How far away is it?'

Emily shrugged. 'About half a mile.'

'No. Exactly how far?'

The teenage girl concentrated. 'One thousand and seventy two yards and four inches...damn. How did I do that?'

Again Bart and Ryoko smiled. ‘Read what it says,’ asked Ryoko.

‘Oh come on. Really?’

Ryoko nodded.

Again Emily stared and concentrated, squinting her eyes up in an attempt to focus.

‘Don’t squint,’ said Bart. ‘No need. Trust me.’

‘Okay,’ said Emily. ‘It says, name Pi to as many decimal places as you can.’

As an accomplished mathematician Emily knew that Pi was a mathematical constant. It was the ratio of a circles circumference to its radius. It is also known as an irrational number, meaning that it is infinite.

She started to reel off the numbers.

‘ 3.14159265358979323846264338327950288419716939937510...’

‘Enough,’ said Bart. ‘Could you do that yesterday?’

‘You know that I couldn’t. What the hell has happened to me?’ Asked Emily, her voice verging on panic.

‘Come on,’ said Bart softly. ‘Let’s go back to the kitchen, get some breakfast. There’s a lot that we need to talk about.’

And then, over pancakes and bacon, Bart and Ryoko changed Emily’s life utterly and completely.

‘It all started over two thousand years ago, around five hundred BC,’ said Bart. ‘When a young Greek man named Ambrogio, traveled to the Delphic Oracle in order to have his fortune told. When he arrived at the temple he saw, and fell in love with, a young priestess named Selene. She returned his feelings. However, Selene was also a favorite of the god Apollo and he was so jealous that, in a fit of rage, he cursed Ambrogio. He decreed that the very touch of the sun would burn him and also that the slightest feel of silver would bring him unbearable pain. On top of this he also cursed him with immortality so that he would be

forced to watch his love, Selene, age and die.’

‘Whoa,’ interjected Emily. ‘Harsh much? I mean, give the guy a break, surely Apollo could get any girl that he wanted? He must have been like the Chris Hemsworth of his day, why the big deal over Selene?’

Bart raised an eyebrow. ‘Who knows how gods think? To the best of my knowledge I have always found them to be both spoiled and capricious beings. Like toddlers with untold power. Best not to offend them. Anyway, Emily, pay attention, this is no fable being told for your amusement, this is a very important.’

‘Hold on,’ blurted Emily. ‘You have always found them? What do you mean?’

But Bart ignored her question and continued. ‘After many years, Artemis, the goddess of hunting who was oft an antagonist of Apollo, took pity on Ambrogio as he wandered, both lonely and alone, and so she gifted him with great hunting skills. These included sharp claws, incredible speed, large fangs as well as the ability to shapeshift into other animals at will.

She also gifted him with the knowledge that if he mixed his saliva with another’s blood through biting them, he could pass on his immortality and his gifts - although that person would not always be compatible so they might actually die instead. However it was too late to save Selene who was already on her death bed due to old age.

Ambrogio became embittered at the loss of his love and stalked the land, killing and changing people at random. Particularly young women. Over time, he and his house grew very powerful and he spread a reign of terror throughout the land.

The ancient Greeks called Ambrogio and his people, The Shadow People. Or People of the Shades. Nowadays we would call them, Vampires.’

‘Vampires?’ asked Emily, her disbelief written plainly on her face.

Both Ryoko and Bart nodded in agreement and Emily could see that this was no practical joke. They were deadly serious.

‘Now,’ continued the big man. ‘Around 300BC Aristotle and Plato started an academy called The Olympus Foundation. From the very best philosophers and warriors of the time they put together a team to hunt down and destroy these Shadow People and their organizations before they literally usurped mankind. Over the next few centuries this ultra-secret society became more and more of a closed clique as the members were encouraged to marry amongst themselves in order to create a group of super-humans, selectively bred to enhance their inherent and learned powers.

These people are called Shadowhunters. Your parents were both members of this elite group. In fact they both come from the line of one of the original Shadowhunter couples. An unbroken line that stretches back over two thousand years.

And now that you have reached your eighteenth birthday, your birthright has manifested. Emily, you are a Shadowhunter.’

The teenager shook her head. It was too much to process. She didn’t want to believe it. And, in point of fact, if she hadn’t just demonstrably proven that something weird had happened to her, she would have simply put her head in the sand and refused to take part.

However, she couldn’t deny that she could read a typewritten message on a tree over half a mile away. Or that she could now recite Pi to over a thousand places. Or that she had easily reduced a two foot high pile of concrete slabs to rubble with a single strike of her bare hand.

But vampires? Shadowhunters? Seriously? Both Ryoko and Bart were staring at her, waiting for a reaction.

‘No shit,’ she said. ‘Do I get some sort of superhero outfit? You know, Spandex body stocking, PVC boots and a polyester cloak.’

Bart laughed. ‘Nah, doesn’t work like that. Would be cool though.’

Strangely enough, Ryoko smiled but also started to cry at the same time, tears rolled silently down her cheeks. ‘There’s more,’ she said, but she couldn’t continue as she buried her head in her hands.

‘What’s wrong?’ Emily asked Bart. ‘Why’s Ryoko crying?’

‘Look, Emily, my darling. We have known that this day would arrive but, well, I suppose that, whatever you know, you can never adequately prepare for it. You see, Emily, in this world of ours the Shadowhunters are pretty much all that stands between humanity and the darkness. They are what protect us all from the rising of the Shadow. They alone are equipped to fight the vilest of evils. And although that includes vampires it also encompasses much more. Ghouls, demons, black-witches. For evil is legion and we are but few. As such, your life is no longer your own. As from today your major reason for existence is to combat the Shadows. To rid the world of evil. To be a Shadowhunter.’

‘So? That doesn’t explain why Ryoko is so upset.’

‘Emily, now that you have come of age and your powers are starting to show, you need to be trained. And we are not qualified to show you what you are capable of. We have done the best that we can but the furthering of your training must now take place elsewhere.’

Emily shook her head. ‘No way. What if I don’t want to leave?’

Bart smiled. ‘Really? You want to live in the asshole of nowhere for the rest of your life. Three hundred miles from the nearest neighbor, with only a bi-annual trip into the city of Anchorage for entertainment?’

‘Well, no. I would like to go someplace. See the world. But I also don’t want to leave.’

‘Can’t do both, my sweetheart. Because the only way to get someplace is by leaving someplace else.’

‘True,’ admitted Emily. ‘And exactly where would this someplace else be? And when?’

‘Well, the Olympus Foundation world headquarters are currently in London, England,’ answered Bart, ‘And as for when,’ he glanced at his watch.

‘Whoa,’ interrupted Emily. ‘What’s with the whole, looking at the watch thing? When I asked I expected you to look for a calendar. What are we talking? Hours or days?’

Bart had the grace to look embarrassed. He shook his head. ‘Not hours.’

‘So days then?’

As Emily spoke she heard the dull thump-thump-thump of an approaching helicopter. She jumped up and ran to the window to see a black Bell Jet Ranger cruising in over the tree tops. It flared out at the last moment and landed outside their house, kicking up a vast cloud of snow as it did so.

She turned to Bart. ‘Now? You gotta be kidding me.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Ryoko. ‘We couldn’t say anything until your eighteenth birthday. Just in case your powers did not display. The Foundation had agreed that, if we didn’t contact them then they would be here mid morning to pick you up. For your own safety. You need to learn how to control your powers.’

‘Also,’ interjected Bart. ‘Now that you’re a bona fide Shadowhunter, you might find yourself in some danger. It’s a big “might”, but we didn’t want to take a chance.’

Emily didn’t know how to react. She was pissed off that such a momentous thing had just been sprung on her with no warning. She was also excited that she was going to London. Yet, at the same time she was nervous as all hell. And she was upset at the prospect of leaving the only people that she had known throughout the last few years.

However, as was her usual habit, she decided to suck it up and simply attack the whole thing head on.

‘Right. I suppose that I’d better get packed then.’

Bart grinned. ‘That’s my girl,’ he said proudly.

Emily went back to her bedroom, followed closely by Ryoko…

…And now, after three connecting flights, she was on her way to London, England and the headquarters of the Olympus Foundation.

Her initial excitement had long since evaporated to be replaced with both trepidation and a not-small dose of genuine fear.

Sometimes life just sucks, she said to herself as the hostess approached and put her meal on her fold down table. Lobster thermidor with French fries and spring vegetables.

Emily smiled to herself. *Yep, sometimes life does suck,* she repeated. *But when you’re flying first class then sometimes it sucks just a little bit less.*

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Chapter 2

A tall man dressed in a chauffeur's outfit complete with cap, was waiting for Emily when she came out of arrivals. He was holding a sign with her name written on it in beautiful gothic script. Emily Hawk.

She walked up to him, carrying her one and only bag.

'Hi,' she said, holding her hand out. 'I'm Emily.'

He didn't acknowledge her hand or her greeting but simply turned slowly and started to walk towards the exit. Emily shrugged and followed.

Outside, parked in the no stopping zone, was a Rolls Royce Silver Wraith. The chauffer walked over to it. As they approached a young man got out of the car. Maybe early to mid twenties.

He was dressed in casual but ultra expensive gear. All of it the same shade of midnight black. Gucci Sneakers. Levi vintage jeans, Valentino t- shirt and an Elder Statesmen cashmere hoodie. At least $6000 worth of designer clothing. Emily didn't get out much but she did have a computer and spent a lot of time online. Vogue, Elle, Iconique. And although she didn't actually remember reading about the man's exact ensemble, she obviously had. Because she knew what each item was, as well as its retail value and where one would shop for the items. It was like her new found abilities had provided her with instant access to everything that she had ever seen or read. *Talk about information overload*, she thought to herself. *I've become a walking version of Google*.

The man scowled at the chaffer before he spoke, his voice well modulated but obviously used to command.

'Phineas,' he said. 'Help Miss Emily with her bag, this instant.'

The chauffer stopped mid stride, turned on his heel and snatched Emily's holdall from her before continuing to the Rolls and placing in the trunk.

'Sorry about that,' said the young man. 'He's an adequate driver but his social graces are far from exemplary.'

He walked up to Emily, his hand outstretched in greeting.

Emily took in the rest of him, the person beyond the clothes. Blond hair, cut short on the sides with a bit of length and some volume on the top. Carefully styled to look as if it hadn't been styled at all. A hint of stubble on his chin. Eyes a bright summer-sky blue. Teeth as white as hotel sheets. Maybe two inches taller than her, which put him at five nine or ten. A gymnast's body. Moved with confidence and grace.

For some reason the mere sight of him irritated her. Too much confidence, too much money and simply…too much.

But he seemed friendly and Emily wasn't long on friends at the moment so she took his hand and shook it.

'Emily, I'm so pleased to meet you,' he said enthusiastically as he shook her hand. 'My name's Nathan Tremblay, I believe that we're from the same neck of the woods.'

'Umm...Alaska?'

'Well, Canada actually. But practically neighbors.'

Yeah, thought Emily. *Give or take four thousand miles or so.*

Nathan opened the door and ushered her in.

Emily settled into the plush soft leather seat and stretched her legs out in front of her, marveling at the amount of room in the back of the huge limousine.

There was a privacy screen in between the passenger seats and the driver, as well as blinds on the windows, reading lights, armrests and a small bar and refrigerator built into the back of the driver's seat.

Nathan opened the fridge and took out a pack of protein bars. Twelve of them. He offered the pack to Emily.

'Here, I'm sure that you're starving. I remember when I first manifested. Body went mental for protein, could have eaten a horse. Don't worry, it stops after a while. Well, actually, it never stops, but it gets better. The insatiable hunger, I mean.'

Emily stared at the box of protein bars and then suddenly realized that Nathan was right, she was ravenously hungry. She took out a bar, unwrapped it and took a bite.

'You see,' the young man continued. 'Because you've just turned, your body is adjusting. Over the next few weeks you're going to probably double in weight. Maybe even more.'

Emily flinched 'Eek – what? Good God, I'll be huge. That's awful. I'll need one of those gross cart things that people use in Walmart so that they can buy their Reece's Pieces and Pop Tarts to keep topping up their obesity problems.'

Nathan laughed. 'No, silly. You'll stay the same size. Perhaps even drop a size. But the density of your muscles will increase as you get stronger and stronger. You see, the denser you get the heavier you are. I mean denser as in mass, not as in Doh! Not sure what you weigh now.'

'One hundred and thirty two pounds,' blurted Emily.

'Cool, then I would figure on topping out at around three hundred plus in a few weeks time.'

Emily shuddered. 'I'll be like Baby Huey, grotesque.'

She opened another bar and hoovered it up without even thinking. After a minute or so she looked down in surprise to see that the box was empty.

Nathan grinned and handed her another box.

Emily blushed but opened it and got to chewing.

'Where we going?' she asked between bites.

'Pankhurst Manor. It's a huge Victorian pile on the outskirts of London. Mind you, we don't spend as much time there as we used to, mainly we use it for training. There are so few of us now – tend to rattle around in the old place a little. It's not like the old days. I tell you, Emily, those were golden days. The manor was full, honored guests, balls. We were all feted by world leaders, great actors and the cognoscenti. Great days indeed.'

Emily raised an eyebrow. Nathan was talking like some old codger, rambling on about the golden days. The expressions didn't sit well coming out of such a young mouth.

She shook her head and slapped her thigh. 'Well, goldarnit. Dem old days was just peachy keen weren't they?' she chuckled.

Nathan displayed the mere ghost of a smile.

'Oh come on Nathan,' continued Emily. 'You sound like someone from one of the old timey movies banging on about the glory days. I mean, hell, what are you, twenty two?'

Nathan nodded. 'Almost right. Just put a one in front of the equation.'

'What, twenty three?'

He laughed. 'No, actually, I didn't say add a one. I said put in a one in front of the twenty two.'

Emily paused for a few seconds. 'One hundred and twenty two?'

‘Spot on, Emily. One hundred and twenty two years old.’

‘But that’s impossible.’

‘A bit of advice, Emily. You’re going to have to drop the word, impossible, from your vocabulary for a while. Because you’re probably going to see at least two or three impossible things every day from here on in.’

‘But one hundred and twenty two?’

‘We age slowly.’ Nathan looked her up and down, his expression one of appraisal. ‘So,’ he said. ‘I hope that you’re relatively happy with the way that you look right now, because that’s pretty much how you’re going to look for the next fifty years or so. If we were allowed to live out our natural lives in peace then we’d probably check out at around a millennium. A good one thousand years old.’

Emily shook her head. ‘Wow,’ she exclaimed. ‘Imagine the size of the cake that you’d need to fit all those candles on.’

She went to grab another protein bar but the box was finished.

Nathan handed her another one.

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Chapter 3

The meeting in the grand hall was almost over. What had needed to be said had been said. Recriminations had been cast where necessary and praise had been given if called for.

But truth be told, there was little call for praise. After all, the fact of the matter was simple – they had still not found what they had been looking for.

And after a thousand years of searching, that was simply not good enough.

It was the first time in almost seventy years that Lord Byron Chelsea had been compelled to call a complete meeting of The House. Obviously he hadn't gone as far as inviting the Familiars or the over one thousand Grinders. The subject to be discussed was simply way too important for them. And anyway, the Grinders' brains were too damaged to comprehend what the meeting was about and he was confident that there would be no real danger, so their presence was unnecessary.

But he had insisted that the rest of the three hundred kindred attend.

In the vampire hierarchy there are four basic levels of rank. Level I was a mere Familiar. These are humans who are vampire wanabees. Little more than servants. A mixture of men and women who are either looking for power and immortality, or simply loners looking for a place to belong. Some are just idiotic teenagers who think that vamps are cool. Overdosed on a surfeit of Twilight novels to the point that they no longer see the fangs and blood-sucking. Only the suaveness, sophistication and tailored clothes. Basically, idiots. Although they are primarily treated as servants, doing daylight errands like carrying messages, they often simply end up as food. However, sometimes they were rewarded and turned but it is unusual for a vampire to turn anyone without very good reason.

The vampire virus is carried in the creature's saliva, so, when one decides to turn a prospect, they simply bite them. It matters not if they kill them in the process as, ultimately, the virus will decide their fate. Some will reanimate and others will either stay dead or die.

The ones that turn do so in one of two ways.

Firstly, they either become level II's. These are lower order vampires.

The virus doesn't kill them but it burns them. Their brains are badly damaged and they are left with physical power and speed, longevity, fast healing, but not immortality. They are mere drones with severely impaired mental capacity and a penchant for serious violence.

Most of the humans that are turned become level II's. The full vampires refer to these as Grinders.

Finally, level III's are successfully turned vamps. These are named as Aspirants. They have access to full powers but have not fully grown into them yet. It takes many hundreds of years for a vampire to mature into his or her powers, such as the ability to glamour, or control people's minds. When they do, they become level IV's or Masters.

Lord Byron was over one thousand years old and was the head of the United Kingdom House. As such he was referred to as a Grand Master.

In the room before him stood seven of his eight Hydra, or lieutenants, as well as another three hundred brethren.

Next to him stood his eighth Hydra and his second in command. Radford Cromwell, the head of the *Nosferatu* Enforcers. The killing arm of the House of Byron. Radford was referred to by all simply as Enforcer and they had done so for the past six hundred years.

Lord Byron cast his eyes over his assembled kindred. ‘I have spoken,’ he said. ‘We must redouble our efforts. Use your familiars to seek during the day. Take yourselves into the darkness every night. We must not rest until it is found. Now go, my children. Go forth and find that which we seek. For our time approaches. The time of the *Nosferatu*. The time of the Shadows.’

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Chapter 4

It took over fifteen minutes for the Rolls to travel from the gatehouse to the actual mansion. And when they arrived, the sight took Emily's breath away, and not in a good sense.

The place was like Hogwarts on steroids. It was all towers and flying buttresses and ribbed arches. Intricately mullioned windows sparkled in the wan English sun and literally hundreds of carved grotesques leered down from the roofs and gutters, their faces a panoply of nightmares.

'So,' said Nathan. 'What do you think?'

'It's very…' Emily searched for the right words, not wanting to offend before she'd even taken her first step out of the car.

'It's a massive pile of crap,' said Nathan. 'Looks like every kiddie's nightmare wrapped up into one gigantic, cold, gray heap of stone. Made poorer by the fact that it's no longer full of guests.'

Emily laughed. 'Well, I didn't want to say.'

'Don't worry,' reassured Nathan. 'It's different once you get inside.'

'Oh,' responded Emily.

'Yeah,' continued the old young man. 'It's worse. Anyway, don't let me put you off. Let's go in and meet and greet. Phineas will take care of your luggage.'

She followed Nathan up the stone stairs to the massive front door where he raised the iron knocker and banged it down a couple of times. The noise echoed through the interior and a few seconds later the door creaked open. Inside stood a man in a dark suit and tie. His eyes were blank and his face devoid of any expression.

Emily greeted him but he didn't react, simply stood still holding the door open.

'Oh, don't worry about him,' said Nathan. 'That's Fergus. I think. Actually, maybe it's Duncan. Whatever, they don't talk much so don't feel like you're being singled out for the silent treatment. Just ignore him. Come on, follow me, I'll introduce you to the boss man.' Nathan walked fast, taking seemingly random corridors and steps. The interior of the mansion was like a maze but, although Emily didn't know where she was in relation to where they were actually heading, she wasn't lost. Her mind automatically tracked every turn, every change of direction and every flight of steps. It felt like she had an internal SatNav monitoring and storing her progress.

'Your bedroom is down there,' said Nathan as he pointed down a corridor. 'Third door on the left. It's quite nice actually, on-suite with a great view and a massive fireplace. Got a couple of creepy paintings but nothing that'll keep you awake, I'm sure. I'll take you there after you've met our esteemed leader. We all stay in this wing of the house, nowadays. The other two residential wings are closed on a permanent basis. No need for them anymore.'

As Nathan spoke he stopped outside a large door, rapped twice on it and then opened and walked in. Emily followed.

The room appeared to be a library. The drapes were drawn shut and a few large church candles wavered in the far reaches of the room. The walls were lined with book filled shelves. The ceiling was so high as to be shrouded in shadow, although it was just possible to see that it had been painted with a series of frescos, ala Sistine Chapel. A pair of wheeled ladders leaned against the shelves.

In the center of the room a large desk was covered in piles of papers and opened books. On the right hand side of the room stood an old man, his back to them as he stared into the fire that burned ferociously in the huge inglenook fireplace. The orange flames provided both warmth as well as most of the light in the room, causing the shadows to dance and flicker about. Shadow puppets without a master.

The man wore a dark, silk robe and his gray hair lay in a thick pony tail that hung down his back to his waist. It was obvious from the breadth of his shoulders and his upright stance that, although old, he was still fit and strong.

'The purpose of knocking, my dear boy,' he sniped. 'Is to wait until the resident of the room gives permission to enter. It is not merely some form of warning that you are about to barge into a man's inner sanctum.'

'Apologies, Ambros. But I thought that you'd like to meet Emily. I picked her up this morning.'

The old man turned to face them, staring intently at Emily as he did so. The first thing that the young girl noticed about him was his eyes. Deep purple. Like they had been carved from pure amethyst and then backlit. She shivered slightly as she felt the power behind them and a thrill of real fear ran through her.

Then they suddenly changed, the light dimmed and the color faded to a light blue. The man smiled and everything was all right.

He stepped forward, his hand held out in front of him. 'My darling Emily,' he greeted as he took her hands in his and held them. 'It is an honor and a privilege to have you here with us.'

He stared intently at her for a few seconds and then nodded. 'I can see your father and your mother in you,' he said. 'But you favor your mother's side. Fair of skin and of appearance. Welcome, my child. I am Sir Ambros, the current leader of this little enclave of souls. How are you settling in?'

'Actually, I've just got here,' answered Emily. 'Haven't even seen my room yet.'

'Scandalous,' said Ambros with a grin. 'And I'd bet that you're hungry as well.'

Emily nodded. 'Starving,' she admitted.

'That'll be the change,' observed Ambros. 'The kitchen is always open. Tell any of the servants that you want food and they will see to it. Try to get at least five or six full meals a day inside of you for the next week. More if you can. The change consumes an enormous amount of fuel so make sure that you keep the fires well stoked. Now, Nathan, show our young lady her room. She can meet everyone at dinner tonight after she's had time to have something to eat, then rest and bathe.'

Nathan nodded and led Emily back to her room, leaving her at the door. 'I'll send someone to fetch you for dinner,' he said. 'Seven o'clock. If you need a snack or actually, anything at all, there's a pull cord next to the bed. Give it a yank and a servant will come and tackle your order.'

The room was huge. More of a suite than a bedroom. A leather sofa, two wingback chairs, a coffee table plus a four seater dining table. A large flat screen television and a dock for an iPod or iPhone. Emily had neither. She had never had any use for a cell phone and she had always streamed her music or played it on the old vinyl records that Bart and Ryoko owned.

Her suitcase was placed on the end of her bed and when she opened it she found it to be empty. After checking the freestanding wardrobe on the one wall she found all of her clothes already hung up or folded in the drawers.

She was surprised to find that, apart from the clothes that she had brought with her, there were at least another five full outfits. All were a simple variation on a theme, black, thick cotton and leather, long coats, calf high boots. She tried one of the coats on. It was superbly tailored, snug fitting with no shiny buttons or any loose epaulettes or tags. Simple and elegant and practical.

It was obvious that the outfits were some sort of a uniform. She opened the door

that led to the bathroom. An oversized four claw, free standing tub graced the center of the room. In the corner a walk in shower large enough for a troop of dancers, with a showerhead the size of a serving platter. Emily smiled happily and turned the water on. It cascaded from the head and thundered onto the tiles like a tropical monsoon as she stripped down and stepped into the steaming deluge.

The hot water was bliss as she soaped herself into a foaming lather, rinsed, turned the water off and then donned a plush cotton robe that hung on the back of the door as well as slipping on a pair of white flannel bath slippers.

As she went through to the bedroom she checked the time. Her watch said that it was 5:48 but she quickly realized that it was still on Alaskan time. That made it 1:48 local. Time for something to eat and then a nap before dinner.

She pulled the bell cord but heard nothing and assumed that the corresponding bell was too far away to register aurally. Surprisingly there was a knock on the door almost instantly so she walked over and opened it. There stood a woman dressed in a classic Victorian maid's outfit. Long coarse black dress, lace up boots, a white pinafore over the top and a white frilly bonnet pulled down over her ears.

Emily smiled but the maid didn't react. She simply stood still and stared blankly ahead.

Eventually Emily spoke. 'Umm…hi. I'm rather hungry and I was hoping that you may be able to fetch me something to eat.'

The maid turned away and walked off. Her movements steady and careful. Almost as though she was drunk and had to concentrate on keeping herself upright and mobile.

'Now that's an odd one,' said Emily to herself. 'Oh well, not long until dinner.'

There was a chill in the air after her shower so Emily decided to light a fire and was happy to note that it had already been laid. On a shelf next to the inglenook stood a wooden box of extra long matches. She struck one and held it to the paper that stuck out from under the pile of logs and kindling. It took instantly and, within a couple of minutes, the seasoned wood crackled and spat, filling the room with gentle, comforting warmth.

At the same time there was a knock on the door. She opened it to reveal the self-same maid, this time wheeling a trolley laden with silver cloche-covered dishes. Again without talking she wheeled the trolley next to the dining table and proceeded to lay out a full meal. The cloches were picked up to reveal a whole roasted chicken, steamed vegetables, fried potatoes and a jug of thick gravy. Finally a slab of chocolate cake and a small jug of cream.

Emily's mouth started watering as she thanked the maid. But once again there was no visible reaction so she simply sat down and tucked in.

After she had eaten, Emily set the alarm on her wrist watch, staggered to her bed, dropped her robe, shucked off her slippers and crawled under the goose-down duvet, falling asleep almost as her head touched the pillow. Jet lagged into peaceful oblivion.

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Chapter 5

Nathan had fetched her for dinner. Unsure of what to wear, Emily had chosen one of the black outfits in her closet, snug fitting leather trousers that were as soft as velvet, a black tailored blouse and calf-length black boots. A midnight symphony in fashion.

As she cast her eyes over the people seated at the dining table, she was glad of her decision to dress in the clothes provided, as everyone else was also clad totally in black.

Ambros, who was seated at the head of the table, stood and greeted her as she entered.

'Emily, my dear, welcome.' He turned to address the others at the table. 'Good people, may I introduce Emily Hawk, our newest Shadowhunter.'

Aside from Nathan, there were five other people seated at the table. Four men and one woman.

Ambros started to introduce them.

'Lyle Potton,' he said. 'Another American.'

Lyle gave Emily a thumb up. 'Yo, Emily.'

Emily nodded her acknowledgment of his greeting as she took quick stock of him. Lyle was huge. Not merely tall but also obscenely sumo- wrestler fat. His face a moon-like ball on top of a neck that consisted mainly of double chins above a barrel shaped body. Arms and legs like tree trunks.

The next to be introduced was a wiry looking man, five ten, complete with dreadlocks and Rastafarian bead necklace, the red, yellow and green standing out against the solemn black of his clothes.

His name was Bastian Miller and he stood and bowed deeply as he greeted Emily. 'My lady, it is an honor.'

Again Emily nodded.

Next in line was the only other girl in the room. Josephine Brady. She was tiny with a build similar to Ryoko.

Her dark hair was long and lank and she wore makeup like it was a defensive mask, thick purple eye shadow, scarlet lips and pale base. In her mouth an unlit cigarette.

She waved to Emily but didn't meet her gaze, her eyes flickering from side to side and head cocked. She reminded Emily of a bird. A falcon.

After Josephine had been introduced, the next man stood up. Karl Wagner. Both his guttural accent and his looks marked him as the quintessential German. Six foot, pale blue eyes. Close cropped blond hair. Very short back and sides. Round steel rimmed eyeglasses. Eyebrows so blond as to be almost invisible, giving him an expressionless look. Disconcerting and slightly disturbing.

The final Shadowhunter was a South African. Piet Van Staden. Six foot three and built like a pro-wrestler. His shoulders and biceps strained against the cotton of his shirt and his neck was so thick it made his head look fractionally too small. He sported a short, cropped beard and his eyes were black pebbles, his lips a cruel slash. On the left side of his face a vivid scar ran from temple to chin, like a purple lightning bolt. Emily could sense that, out of all of the people in the room, this was a

very dangerous man. Easily the most dangerous human being that she had ever met. His aura projected a barely constrained violence. As if he had literally been dragged straight from a battle in order to attend the dinner and he was less than happy about it.

When he spoke it was as if he wasn't used to verbal communication, the words coming out in short, grammatically incorrect chunks.

'Hello, Emily. To meet you I is pleased. If anything you does need. Ask me. If I's can help, I will.'

'Thank you, Piet,' acknowledged Emily. 'That's very sweet of you; I'll bear that in mind.'

The big man grunted, blushed at the compliment and then sat down heavily, scowling at the table in order to cover his embarrassment.

'Aah, Piet, you're so sweet. What an absolute angel, would you like a pat on the head,' teased Lyle as he made wet kissy sounds.

Piet glared at him and then shook his head disgustedly and went back to scowling at the table. Ambros ushered Emily to a chair in between Nathan and Bastian and, as soon as she sat down, a procession of servants started to bring in the evening meal. And although she had eaten a mere couple of hours ago she was ravenous again.

Piles of inch thick rump steaks, fries, slices of smoked ham, corn on the cob, poached eggs and Waldorf salad. Emily piled her plate high, noticing that everybody else was doing the same. Except for Lyle who simply pulled one of the serving platters of steak over to his place setting, threw a diverse amount of sides on top of it and got to eating.

Emily watched him for a while, fascinated at how swiftly he was consuming his food. He worked like an automaton, both hands moving in concert, left, right, left. Shoveling food into his chewing jaws, swallowing, chewing and swallowing again. An industrial garbage disposal unit.

He glanced up and noticed Emily watching him.

'This is how a real man eats,' he said, his mouth full of masticated steak. 'It's quite a turn on, isn't it?'

Before Emily could answer, Piet pointed at the huge man. 'Watch your mouth, fat boy,' he growled. 'Don't make me come over there and teach you some manners.'

Lyle sneered at the Afrikaner but Emily noticed that he didn't push the point.

The rest of the meal was spent in almost total silence and every time that Emily attempted to strike up any sort of discussion it was met with a one or two word answer, followed by silence. After ten minutes she started to feel a little uncomfortable.

Eventually Nathan, sensing her discomfort, addressed her directly. 'Don't get disheartened,' he advised. 'It's always like this at meal times. The odd bit of sniping between Piet and Lyle…well, actually between someone and Lyle and then the rest is simply people stuffing their faces.'

'Jealousy,' interjected the fat man. 'People rib on me because they're consumed with envy. Six hundred pounds of concentrated Alpha male enters the room and the green eyed monster rears its ugly head. No worries though,' he continued. 'When you're as attractive as me you just gotta learn to live with the cupidity. Fortunately, I'm a big enough man to take it.' He hoovered up a handful of fries as he spoke, displaying a mouthful of chewed potato.

Emily shuddered.

'Hey, you bong belly pickney slabba,' said Bastian, using the Jamaican vernacular. 'Shut your fat face or I come over there and stick my foot up your ass.'

'Talk English,' retaliated Lyle. 'I know that you can.'

'Aah, kiss me backside you fassy hole.'

'Enough,' said Ambros. Both Bastian and Lyle immediately stopped their bantering

and concentrated on their food again. Ambros shook his head and smiled at Emily. ‘You’d think that after a hundred years or so they would learn to stop acting like children, wouldn’t you?’

Emily nodded.

‘Anyway,’ continued the old man. ‘Nathan is correct, meal times are not great for socializing. Due to the massive calorific intake that a Shadowhunter needs, they tend to view meals as simple refueling exercises.

Formal dinners are the exception. But never fear, you’ll get to know everyone better tomorrow morning at training. I recommend that you get a good night’s sleep, I’m sure that you are still more than a little jet-lagged. I’ll send one of the chaps to show you to the dojo in the morning. Set your alarm for seven, ready by seven thirty.’

Emily nodded and then applied herself to her food like everyone else at the table as she scarfed down her meal like a trencherman.

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Chapter 6

The dojo was vast. Big enough for at least sixty plus people to train comfortably. The seven Shadowhunters looked lost in the huge open space.

'Why is it so big?' Emily asked Bastian, who had shown her to the dojo after fetching her from her room.

'Times gone by there used to be many more Shadowhunters,' he answered.

'Where have they gone?'

Bastian shrugged. 'Depends on your belief system, I suppose. If you're a Buddhist, reborn. Christian, heaven. Muslim, resurrection. Me, I believe in Zion.'

'Hold on,' said Emily. 'You mean that they're all dead?'

'As the Dodo,' confirmed Bastian.

'How?'

'It's one of those side effects you get when you spend your whole time fighting almost unkillable undead beings with fangs and claws. A lot of us end up underground in wooden boxes.'

'But aren't we supposed to be like superfast and megastrong?'

Bastian raised an eyebrow. 'You ever seen a vamp?'

Emily shook her head. 'I don't think so.'

'That would be a no then,' confirmed the Ratsa. 'You would remember if you had. Well, we're fast and strong but they is faster. Maybe not stronger but close. Also they heal real quick. I mean, so do we but they heal almost instantaneously. Makes them damn hard to kill.'

'So what's the point then?' asked Emily. 'How can we beat them?'

Bastian grinned. 'We train. They may be quicker but we're meaner. We got skills, girl. And we got weapons. Silver edged swords, silver bullets, lots of firepower. Come on, train with me first, then you can spend a bit of time with Piet, he's number one with bladed weapons.'

Emily followed the Rasta to a sparring mat on the side of the dojo, a standard twenty six foot by twenty six foot.

'Right,' said Bastian. 'Let's fight.'

Emily bowed and then assumed a standard Bow Stance or *Gong Bu*, leading leg in front and slightly bent, trailing foot angled at a forty five degree angle.

It was a great stance for attacking. The structure of it allowing her to punch with greater power by driving the rear leg into the ground as well as ensuring that her rear leg could be quickly drawn forward for kicking attacks.

She waited for Bastian to assume a position before she started. But to her surprise he didn't. Instead he danced from side to side in front of her, his body position low, arms weaving a pattern in front of his chest as he moved. It was hypnotic. A snake charmer's flute to a cobra.

Then he rolled and jumped up, swinging his foot in a circle and cracking it alongside Emily's head. She rocked sideways as the blow landed and then she swept her leading foot forwards in an attempt to unbalance him. But he was no longer there as he danced away, spinning and rolling. A constantly moving target.

Again he spun and struck, his foot connecting with Emily's knee, sending her crashing to the floor.

She rolled away and flicked her legs, springing back onto her feet as she did.

Bastian danced sideways, tucking and rolling and jumping as he did.

Emily shook her head and then crouched low, assuming the stance of the Tiger, her hands clawed in front of her, muscles relaxed as she prepared for explosive power.

She knew that she had to stop Bastian moving. Somehow she had to get hold of him and then strike hard and fast as soon as she did.

Bastian noted her change of tactic and nodded his approval.

And then he blurred into movement, legs sweeping, fists striking, elbow and knees smashing into Emily as he spun around her at blinding speed.

She went down under a welter of blows and before she could pick herself up Bastian had her in a savage choke hold. Just before she blacked out, Bastian let go, stood up and helped her to her feet.

'Breathe,' he said.

Emily took a deep breath and then socked the Rasta on the shoulder. 'What the hell? I thought that we were sparring. What's with the whole kicking my butt thing?'

Bastian stared at her, his face deadly serious. 'Emily,' he said. 'At the Olympus Foundation when we train, we don't spar. We fight. Properly.'

'Why?'

'I assume that you have sparred before,' countered Bastian.

'Every day,' admitted Emily.

'Not to put too fine a point on it,' continued Bastian. 'But it didn't do you much good, did it? I kicked your ass without even raising a sweat and I can see that you're at least a first degree black belt. Plus the fact that you're uber strong and fast.'

'Yeah well you wouldn't stand still. What's with all the dancing?'

'It's called Capoeira,' he answered. 'It's a fast and versatile martial art from Brazil. It was developed for fighting when you're outnumbered or at a technological disadvantage.' He somersaulted forward and flicked a kick over Emily's head to demonstrate. 'The style emphasizes using the lower body to kick, sweep and take down and the upper body to assist those movements as well as attacking. You use a series of complex positions and body postures which you chain together in an uninterrupted flow so that you can strike, dodge and move without breaking motion. Makes it seriously unpredictable. And when you're fighting a bunch of Vamps you gotta keep moving 'cause those suckers are as quick as crap out of a goose. Come on, I'll teach you.'

For the next four hours Bastian grilled Emily in the art of Capoeira, starting with the *Ginga*, a constant dancing motion that keeps the capoeirista in regular movement, making them a frustrating target for a forward-advancing opponent. Then he moved on to the various striking and defensive techniques, working her hard until her whole body was covered in ugly black bruises.

After four hours they all stopped for lunch, trooping off to the dining room where mountains of food awaited them. Breads, fruit, whole roasted chickens, rice, potatoes and pulses.

Nathan sat next to Emily and ensured that she had enough to eat and drink.

'Bastian working you hard, I see.'

Emily nodded. 'I look like I've been in a major automobile accident,' she quipped. 'I don't think that there's a square inch of my body that hasn't got a bruise on it.'

'There might be,' interjected Lyle as he leered at Emily. 'Perhaps you should strip down and I'll check for you.'

'Shut it, fat boy,' growled Piet.

'Up yours,' grunted Lyle as he shoved a whole potato in his mouth.

'Don't worry about the physical damage,' said Nathan. 'We all heal up real quick. By tomorrow morning there won't be a mark on you. In a few weeks time, once you've fully changed, the bruises will heal almost instantly. Even deep cuts and bone

breaks will mend in minutes.'

'Cool,' responded Emily. 'Will it still hurt like it does now?'

'Like buggery,' affirmed Nathan. 'We heal but we still feel pain just like anyone else. Mind you, the density of our muscle makes it much harder to hurt us. You'll find that something that would slice into a normal person will barely deliver more than a shallow cut.'

When they had finished eating they headed back to the dojo.

All accept for Lyle who stayed seated as he crammed another chicken down, followed by almost a gallon of freshly squeezed orange juice. Piet slapped the fat man on the back of his head as he walked past him but Lyle didn't even react, so entranced was he by his food.

Bastian walked next to Emily. 'For the rest of the day I want you to train with Piet,' he said. 'He's the best when it comes to weapons. Blades, staffs, throwing stars, that type of thing.'

'What about firearms?'

'No. Karl is the firearms expert. You can spend time with him tomorrow.'

'Okay. If you are the combat expert, Piet is the weapons guy and Karl is firearms – what is Josephine?' asked Emily.

'Tech geek,' answered Bastian. 'I mean, she can fight pretty good but she's beyond awesome when it comes to computers and such. You've gotta watch her though,' he continued. 'She's a sandwich or two short of a picnic basket. Very emotional, goes off for everything and anything. So we try to keep her out of the field.'

'And dare I ask what Lyle excels at?'

'Strength. Bong belly boy is stronger than any two of us put together. Even Big Piet. I mean, Lyle is one of life's genuine assholes but he's good to have around in a fight. Like the hulk but without the green skin or the social graces.'

Emily grinned. 'Fair enough.'

When they got back to the dojo she paired up with Piet. He started her with a *Bo*. A six foot long, heavy Red Oak staff that was held with two hands and used as a spear, a sword and a staff. Then they moved onto swords, especially the katana, a traditional Japanese Samurai weapon. After that they progressed to nunchuks, shuriken, throwing knives and sling shots.

Emily had trained with all of the weapons before but the South African Shadowhunter brought a level of skill and expertise to their handling that transcended normality. It was as if every weapon was an extension of him. Another appendage as opposed to a separate weapon.

After four hours with him she was ready to drop from exhaustion. Piet finally stopped, collected the weapons up and nodded his approval. 'You're good,' he said. 'Well done.'

'I don't feel good,' returned Emily. 'I feel clumsy and uncoordinated. Like a beginner.'

Piet laughed. A gruff sound more like a dog's growl than an affirmation of amusement. 'Trust me,' he said. 'Right now, you are superior to any other human being in the world.'

'What about you?' questioned Emily. 'And the other Shadowhunters? And the vamps?'

'I said Human Beings,' answered Piet as he turned away. 'Now come on, let's go and eat.'

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Chapter 7

The next ten days were pretty much the same.

They woke early, ate, went to the dojo and then, as far as Emily was concerned, people took turns beating her up.

Except for one morning when she was told to train with Lyle.

It surprised her. She was expecting a morning of sexual innuendo, crass comments and self importance. Instead, Lyle put her through a physical training routine that brought with it a new respect for the fat man. For all of his bravado he obviously worked hard at building his strength and Emily learned a lot about how to train to maximum efficiency, building both power and endurance.

At the end of the session she thanked Lyle and patted him on the back in a show of camaraderie.

'Oh ho,' he responded. 'Look who's trying to get close up and physical with the big man. Join the cue, girl,' he continued. 'But don't fear, there's enough of Lyle to go around no matter how many of you there are.'

Emily shook her head. 'You know, Lyle, you're a complete half-wit.'

The fat man blew a massive raspberry and left the dojo to look for a snack.

On the last of the ten days, Karl took her to the underground shooting range for her morning training.

The German laid out a selection of firearms on the table in front of the targets. Emily was familiar with most of the usual makes and calibers of handguns but she had to admit that many of the weapons on the table were outside her area of prior knowledge.

Karl pointed as he explained. 'Desert Eagle, 50 cal auto pistol, Glock 10mm, Thunder Twelve shotgun revolver, Fostech semi-auto shotgun.' He picked up a handful of mixed ammunition.

'Note that all of the rounds are silver tipped. Or, in the case of the shotguns, pure silver. You'll also see that we don't bother with the smaller caliber weapons, 9mm, 38 specials and the like. If you're hunting for blood suckers, you need loads of muzzle velocity to take them down.

My preference is the Desert Eagle. You might prefer the Glock.

Slightly smaller handle. Easier fit. Also a bit easier to conceal. The shotguns are a little bulky, even the Thunder Twelve but we only use those if we're going on an overt mission. Full scale attacks on a headquarters or such. Right,' he slapped a magazine into one of the Glocks and wracked the slide. 'Let's boogie. Show me what you've got.'

Emily took the weapon and hefted it a couple of times to get the feel. She knew that Glock had an internal safety, so all she had to do was point and pull. She looked downrange at the man shaped silhouette target, picked the pistol up and squeezed off a round. The slug went through the center of its head.

Quickly she burned off the rest of the rounds, banging off all fifteen in fewer than three seconds. Every shot struck the target in the head. It was exceptional shooting and she couldn't help but grin with satisfaction as she placed the empty pistol back on the table.

Karl nodded and picked up another two fully loaded Glocks, one in each hand.

Then he faced the target and blazed away, pulling the triggers faster than seemed humanly possible. A veritable storm of silver tipped lead tore through the target. As each weapon's slide racked back he ejected the empty magazines, flipped the pistols into the air, grabbed two more full magazines from the table, rammed the magazines into the pistols as they came down and burned off another thirty rounds in less than two seconds.

The paper target had been totally shredded.

He turned to the flabbergasted Emily. 'As I said. Blood suckers take a lot of firepower to put down. But don't worry; we'll work on your technique.'

That afternoon Emily found herself in the library with Josephine Brady. The small, dark haired girl was showing Emily the computerized archives and setting her up with a password so that she could access them whenever she needed. She also gave her an iPhone. She explained that she had tweaked the phone, adding an extra layer of security, boosting its reception, battery life and storage capacity to around twenty times more than the factory model.

It also came with two hidden features that the Apple Corporation would never have dreamed of. The flashlight setting had been amped up to include a powerful UV light and if you pushed the on button and the bottom of the phone together, a compressed air cylinder shot a silver needle out to a range of twenty feet. Neither of these would be fatal to Vampires but Josephine explained that they would definitely slow them down and give someone time to either escape or to get hold of a better weapon.

By the time that the evening meal came around, Emily felt like her brain had exploded. Due to her new photographic memory she had remembered everything that Josephine had told her but actually understanding it was a different kettle of fish. She simply hoped that her mind would eventually sift through all of the info and make some sense of it over time.

But truth be told, it was with a heavy heart that Emily finally went to bed that evening. It seemed that everyone was better at everything than she was. Her new found strength and speed and mind powers had seemed so awesome only a few days ago. Now she felt like the kid in the playground that always gets chosen last because no one wants the loser on their team.

If she had been a different sort of girl she may have cried herself to sleep. Instead she resolved to try harder.

Then she made sure that the fire was built up and snuggled down for a good night's rest.

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Chapter 8

Emily sat in Ambros' study across the desk from the old man.

His hair hung loose about his shoulders as opposed to his usual ponytail and he was thumbing a wad of tobacco into his pipe with a calloused and nicotine stained thumb. It had surprised Emily when she had seen that all of the Shadowhunters smoked. But when she brought it up with Bastian he had simply laughed as he informed her that the normal rules did not apply to them. They were immune to mortal disease, he explained. No cancer, no dementia. Not even the common cold. So if they wanted to smoke it was merely a lifestyle choice. Not a health issue.

He had offered her a cigarette but Emily simply couldn't get over her natural prejudice that she held towards the cancer-sticks and she had refused. Bastian had chuckled and said that he would give her fifty years or so and she would be an addict just like the rest of them.

Ambros finally got his pipe to take and he leaned back in his chair and worked up a head of smoke with a contented look on his face.

'So,' he said. 'How are you getting on?'

Emily shrugged. 'Okay, I suppose.'

'You suppose?'

The teenager nodded. 'I mean, I like it here. But, honestly, I feel a bit useless. Everybody is better at everything than I am. Bastian beats the crap out of me, Lyle's like more than twice as strong as me, Karl can shoot multiple weapons at once and Piet is like the Terminator. Not to mention Josephine, who's just the ultimate super-geek. I thought that I was meant to be this super-hero, uber-mean dude but all I am is the playground nerd.'

Ambros raised an eyebrow. 'I see,' he said. 'Strange way to see things.'

'Maybe,' agreed Emily. 'But it's true.'

The old man shook his head. 'No, my dear girl,' he countered. 'It is patently not true. In fact, I would venture to say that it is quite the opposite. Firstly, how long have you been training with the other Shadowhunters?'

'Ten days,' answered Emily.

Ambros nodded. 'Gosh. A whole ten days. How many days do you think that Bastian has been training to perfect his art?'

'I don't know.'

'Well I do,' said Ambros. 'Approximately forty six thousand days. When Karl started training with firearms, his first weapons were a Napoleonic era flintlock cavalry pistol and a Baker muzzle-loading service rifle. He has been shooting since before cartridges were invented. Before semi-auto pistols and machine guns. That is a serious amount of practice.

And do you know that Josephine actually knew Charles Babbage? The man who invented the first proto-computer back in the nineteen thirties. Piet fought against the British in the first and the second Boer wars back in the late eighteen hundreds. These people have put in serious time to perfect their skills, so you cannot be disheartened that they may be better than you.'

'What about Lyle?' interjected Emily.

Ambros grimaced. 'Lyle is…well, he's Lyle. He's actually a relative youngster.

Thirty five years old. But he's driven. Trains hard and, to be brutally honest, he's a bit of a freak.

Even without Shadowhunter powers he would be unbelievably strong. It's just one of those things. But I'll tell you something,' continued Ambros. 'After Lyle you are the strongest here. And another few facts that may interest you; you're pretty much second best at everything.

Bastian reckons that you could take anyone here, except for him. Karl says that you are the best shot that he's come across for over a hundred years. And as for Piet, well let's just say that he didn't say anything overtly bad about you, which is the closest that you will ever get to a compliment from him.'

Emily didn't react.

The old man shook his head. 'Do you appreciate what I have just told you?' he asked.

Emily nodded. 'I think so. You're saying that I'm not the best at anything. But that's what I've just been telling you.'

'No,' said Ambros. 'I'm telling you that you are almost the best at everything. Even though you are a mere stripling that has only had ten days training. I'm telling you that you are special. I'm telling you that you are the most amazingly talented Hunter that I have come across since your mother and father. And I would venture that you surpass even them. Emily,' he continued. 'You have the potential to be the very best of the best. The ultimate Shadowhunter.'

Emily smiled. 'Wow,' she said. 'Thanks. That's cool.'

'I'm sure that it is,' affirmed Ambros.

'And what about Nathan?' asked Emily. 'Everyone seems to have a specialty except Nathan. What's his thing?'

Before Ambros answered Emily was sure that she saw the tiniest flicker of sympathy cross his face. 'Nathan is a bit of an all-rounder,' he said. 'In the past he was referred to by all as "The Fixer". He is gifted at arbitration, negotiation. A born diplomat. A politician, I suppose. He used to keep the gears greased between the Olympus Foundation and the government, the captains of industry, the news and entertainment moguls.'

'And now?' asked Emily.

'Now, things are different,' admitted Ambros. 'A hundred years ago, before the internet and social media, we didn't have to keep such a low profile. Obviously we were a secret organization but there were many notables who were in the know, as it were. Basically, Nathan took care of these notables.'

'I see,' noted Emily. 'Wow, no wonder he hankers after the old days. Seems like a real come down. He was almost like the public face of the Foundation and now he's…well, an all rounder.'

'Yes,' said Ambros. 'It has been a difficult transformation for Nathan. Anyway, now, that said, I think that it's time for you to venture out into the field. Nothing too overt. A short trip to London. I'll send Bastian and Nathan with you. There are a few things that I'd like you all to check up on. I'll explain fully before you leave. So, go to your room, pack a few outfits and be ready to leave after lunch.'

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Chapter 9

Emily traveled to London with Bastian and Nathan, all three ensconced in the back of the Rolls, surrounded by leather and wood.

Nathan was his usual attentive self, ensuring that Emily was comfortable and had something to eat and drink, but she could tell that he seemed to be a little preoccupied with his own thoughts.

Bastian, on the other hand, became visibly more relaxed the further they got from the headquarters. When she mentioned this to him he laughed.

'I can't stand that old place,' he informed Emily. 'All those grotesque sculptures and musty old carpets and dark corners. Sucks, man. Wait until you see the London pad. It's the dogs.'

Emily raised an eyebrow. 'The dogs?'

'English expression,' explained Bastian. 'The dog's bollocks. Means that it's seriously cool.'

'Whatever,' said Emily. 'Sounds gross. I didn't find the big house so bad. The servants were a bit weird though.'

Bastian actually shuddered. 'Man, I hate those dudes,' he said, quietly.

'Hate seems a bit extreme,' argued Emily. 'I mean, given, they're not the most communicative of souls.'

'That's because they don't have any,' said Bastian.

'What?' asked Emily.

'Souls,' continued the Jamaican. 'The servants don't have any souls.' He stared at the teenage girl. 'Man. You didn't know?'

'Know what?'

'The servant dudes at the manor. They're all zombies. Dead.'

Emily shook her head. 'Good one, Bastian,' she said. 'Not funny though.'

'He's not joking,' assured Nathan. 'Sorry, I should have told you. They've been around forever. Some of them for hundreds of years. That's why they don't talk or react. They can't, due to being …well…dead, I suppose.'

'No way,' insisted Emily. 'Zombies don't exist.'

'Sure,' interjected Bastian. 'Or vampires or werewolves or Shadowhunters.'

Emily lay back in her seat, her face pale with shock. 'But, aren't zombies all, like, rotting and gross and keen to eat your brains and stuff. I mean, what if they bite us?'

'You mean "Night of the Living Dead" type zombies? Like the movies?' clarified Bastian.

'Exactly,' agreed Emily.

'No way. That's not how it works. That Romero dude has a lot to answer for. Real zombies are made by the Obeah Man.'

'Okay,' acknowledged Emily. 'And who is the Obeah Man when he's at home?'

'I suppose that you'd call him a witch doctor,' answered Bastian. 'Voodoo man. He reanimates dead folk, turns them into servants. The staff at the manor were turned many years ago by an Obeah Man that worked for the Vamps. Ambros rescued them and then just sort of took them on.'

'Wow,' exclaimed Emily. 'That's super creepy.'

'It's worse than creepy,' said Bastian with feeling. 'It's slavery. They got no choice

in the matter.' The Jamaican shook his head. 'Man, that slavery shit stopped almost two hundred years ago.'

Emily put her hand on Bastian's arm. 'They're dead, Bastian,' she said. 'Or undead, not sure. But they don't know that they're slaves.'

'I know,' admitted the Jamaican. 'Still doesn't make it right.'

Emily sensed that neither Nathan nor Bastian felt like speaking for a while so she lay back in her seat and went over the meeting that they had just had with Ambros before they left.

The Olympus Foundation did not work in a vacuum. They had many people on their payroll, notably many high ranking policemen. Most of them had no real idea what the Foundation actually did but they all knew that if something unusual came to light it would behoove them to contact Ambros and put him in the picture. And so it was that the old man had been forwarded a copy of some CCTV footage of a break in at an antique shop in London called the Kensington Antique Emporium.

The fact of the break in was not unusual in itself. What made the case stand out was, firstly, nothing was stolen. Even though the intruders had obviously searched for something, as was evident by the wholesale mess that they left behind. And, secondly, it appeared that they had somehow managed to sabotage a state-of-the-art surveillance system, rendering it useless as far as identifying anyone concerned. It was this sabotage that had mainly attracted the police chief superintendent's attention. While the footage seemed at first glance to be fine, whenever the actual perpetrators came into shot it appeared that they were moving at ultra-high speed. Like a film that had been speeded up by a factor of ten.

Ambros had explained that he wanted them to take a closer look at the incident. Interview the owner of the Emporium, case out the area and see if anything of interest came to light.

By the time Emily had gone over all of the new info that had been dumped on her, the Rolls had arrived at their destination.

A large block of Victorian Gothic apartments situated above St Pancras Station, London. The driver drove them into the underground parking garage and they took a private elevator up to the penthouse apartment.

They unpacked and while Bastian prepared a lunch, Nathan gave Emily a quick tour of the surrounds. The penthouse occupied the top two floors of the building. It featured five bedrooms, each with their own on-suite and small sitting area. There was also a main dining room, a large lounge, a gourmet kitchen and several spacious balconies that boasted sweeping views of the capital city.

Nathan also explained that the apartment was fully serviced by the adjoining five star Marriot Hotel and the Foundation had an open account, so food could be ordered from any of the multitude of restaurants if they wanted.

'So,' said Emily. 'No zombie servants then.'

Nathan chuckled. 'Why do you think that Bastian loves it here so much?'

The three of them ate in the kitchen. Cheese, bread, pates, cold cuts and fruit.

'Right,' said Bastian after they had all had their fill. 'Let's get to Kensington and give this antiques place the once over. We can take the tube from here, easier than using the car.'

'I can't make it,' said Nathan. 'Got some personal stuff to attend to. But I'll be free tomorrow.'

Bastian shook his head. 'We're not here to do personal stuff, man. Business first then you can sort your crap out afterwards.'

'Calm down,' snapped Nathan. 'I've got stuff to do. Chill, it's not the end of the world. Anyway, you've got Emily and it's just a simple walk and talk. Not like you're going to need back up.'

Bastian shrugged. 'Fine. Go do your stuff. We'll see you later.'

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Chapter 10

Bastian guided Emily through the intricacies of the London underground, buying her an Oyster card, ensuring that she had enough money on it and making sure that she knew where to stand on the escalators.

Just before they had left the apartment, Bastian had handed Emily a leather wallet. Inside was a warrant card with her rank, name and number. According to the card she was a DS, detective sergeant, in the Special Branch.

According to Bastian it was a genuine card, although if push came to shove and someone looked more deeply into it they would discover that she wasn't actually a member.

But the Jamaican assured her that it wouldn't get to that, so she need not worry. They merely carried the cards as it gave them a reason to question people without raising suspicion.

Under an hour later they were sitting in the Emporium's reception area, waiting for the owner.

And when he walked into the room he was nothing like Emily had expected. This was no insipid, eccentric, bespectacled purveyor of antiquities. Instead, the man who walked in towered over both her and Bastian. Around twenty three years old, his brown hair short and clean but a little bit shaggy, like he had simply ran his hands through it instead of using a comb. He wore a dark single breasted suit that had obviously been handmade, as had his Oxfords. A pale blue shirt offset his blue eyes, so pale as to resemble flecks of shattered ice. But even the well-cut lines of the suit could not disguise the cords of muscle that stood out in ridges on his arms and shoulders.

He walked towards them, confident and assured. His movements controlled. Economical. Graceful yet somehow unrefined. As if he was purposefully keeping himself in check.

'William Townsend,' he greeted, shaking Bastian by the hand.

'Thank you for meeting with us, Sir William. I am DI, detective inspector, Bastian Miller and this is my associate, DS, detective sergeant, Emily Hawk.'

William grasped Emily's hand and she had to stop herself gasping. It was as though someone had run an electric current through her. And sudden images of his shirtless torso filled her mind. She blushed a high red and pulled her hand back like a scorched cat.

Sir William raised an inquisitive eyebrow. 'I'm sorry, miss Hawk,' he said, his voice a low, husky growl. 'Are you alright?'

'Of course,' snapped Emily. 'Why wouldn't I be?'

William looked away, obviously slightly taken aback by her waspish reaction.

Emily felt an immediate urge to apologize. Grab him by the arm. Pull him towards her. But she quashed the feelings and tried desperately to assume a calm and professional demeanor.

God, Emily, she scolded herself. *Show some control. What the hell is wrong with you?*

'Sir William,' interjected Bastian. 'I wonder, could we talk about the break in?'

'Of course. Not much to tell. I've given your lot at the station a copy of the CCTV. Seems to have been on the blink. Kept skipping forward or something. Pity.

Although they didn't take anything. Most likely just a bunch of youngsters looking to trash a place. A few breakages, mirrors, vases and such. All covered by insurance. Sorry, not much more that I can say. Obviously no one was here. Took place around midnight.'

'So you're absolutely sure that nothing was taken?' insisted Bastian.

William nodded.

'Well then, that's about it,' said the Jamaican. 'Oh, one last thing. Have you heard of any other similar robbery attempts in the area?'

'No. Sorry, nothing that I know of, although I certainly wouldn't take that as gospel. I don't actually spend a lot of time at the shop.'

'Thanks,' said Bastian as he turned to leave, beckoning to Emily as he did so.

Emily nodded her goodbye to William and followed Bastian from the Emporium.

As she got to the door, however, the tall man hurried after them.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'But if I don't do this then I shall regret it for a very long time, of that I'm sure.'

Bastian looked at him quizzically, wondering what information he was going to give up now. 'Go ahead, Sir William. What would you like to tell us?'

'Well, nothing. I mean, nothing to tell.' He looked a little abashed. 'What I mean is…' he hesitated and bit his bottom lip. 'Miss Hawk,' he continued. 'I was just wondering if…perhaps you might…on the off chance…possibly be free tomorrow night. You know. To go out. Dinner. With me. And you of course. I mean…the both of us.'

Emily blushed again and then cursed herself internally for doing so.

'Of course, Sir William,' she said. 'That would be great.'

The tall man looked disappointed. 'Oh, well. Yes. Of course. Sorry, I just thought that it was worth an ask. You know. Nothing ventured and all that. Silly of me really.'

Emily laughed. 'I said yes.'

William's grin was a pleasure to behold as it spread over his face, lighting up his eyes and revealing his strong, white teeth. 'Of course you did. Splendid. Right, I'll pick you up tomorrow at eight.'

'Fine,' agreed Emily.

'Where?' asked William.

Emily gave him the address to the apartment in St Pancras and then she and Bastian took their leave.

As they walked away from the Emporium, towards the tube station Bastian chuckled under his breath. 'You know, Emily,' he said. 'You can control that.'

'What?' asked Emily, suddenly paranoid that Bastian had somehow perceived her visions of William's naked torso or noticed her electric reaction to the tall man's touch.

'Blushing,' he continued. 'It's simply a visible manifestation of the physiological rebound of the basic instinctual fight/flight mechanism, when physical action is not possible.'

'I wasn't blushing,' she denied.

'Course you were,' affirmed Bastian.

'Well what if I was,' continued Emily. 'You're saying that it's a flight or fight response. Not true, I didn't want to fight William and I certainly didn't feel an urge to run away.'

'That was just a simplification,' said Bastian. 'What I meant was that it was triggered by an emotional stimulus. Fear, embarrassment, anxiety. Whatever, you figure out what emotion is causing it, once you know that then you can control it. Easily. After all, we are Shadowhunters. We're meant to be able to control our emotions and stuff. So work on it.'

‘Up yours,’ grinned Emily. ‘I’ve got better things to worry about.’

‘True,’ laughed Bastian. ‘Tell you what, let’s split up. We need to visit as many antique places as we can. See if there have been any similar occurrences compared to the break in at the Emporium. I really want to know what that bunch of blood suckers were searching for. Obviously they didn’t find it at Sir William’s place, so odds are that they’ll keep looking. Unless our posh friend was lying, but I don’t think that he was. Anyway, you can take the opportunity on your date to grill him a bit more. See what you can get out of him.’

‘We’ll see,’ said Emily. ‘Okay, I’ll head this way and you go that way.

I reckon that we pop into any place that looks as if it sells old or interesting stuff. Check if they’ve had any break ins and question them as to what they’ve heard or what they might know about Sir William’s break in.’

‘Suits me,’ agreed the Jamaican. ‘Look, if you keep heading in that direction, eventually you’ll come to central London. Soho, Leicester Square, so on. It’s also going to get dark soon, around four o’clock. When you’re done, get a cab back to the apartment and we can consolidate our info there. Right?’

Emily gave a thumb up. ‘Right.’

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Chapter 11

After a couple of hours it became obvious to Emily that she wasn't going to luck out with any relevant information. All she could glean from the people that she interviewed was that Sir William was known to all but not actually known by anyone. He was highly respected and considered to be the best at what he did.

She kept walking towards central London but, soon after speaking to the tenth shop owner, she gave up on her information gathering and assumed the role of a young tourist in London for her first time. She marveled at the ancient buildings, the narrow alleyways, the black cabs and the red double-decker buses.

Pubs with names like "The Slug and Lettuce" or "the Walrus and the Carpenter" or Emily's favorite – "The Dirty Dick".

Bobbies on the beat with their tall custodian helmets. World renowned department stores like Harrods and Liberty and Hamley's. She also stopped outside almost every designer clothing store and lusted after the dresses and accessories inside. Clothes designed purely for beauty, with not an iota of care paid to their practicality. Proper girl clothes.

And before she knew it, the sun had set and she was lost. A light drizzle filled the air with moisture, refracting the neon lights into a million tiny rainbows and beading on her hair and clothes in little crystal spheres. The streets around her were a lot less salubrious than the ones that she had been walking along earlier and there were a lot less people around.

She walked to the end of the alley to discover that it was a dead end so she took out her phone and brought up her Satnav. It showed that she was in the center of an area called SOHO. The London Town guide called it "The Sleazy Heart of London's Theater land". But she wasn't exactly nervous. After all, she justified to herself, this wasn't downtown Laos or Sarajevo. It was the center of one of the capital cities of the first world.

But every city has an underbelly. And therein live the bottom feeders. Petty thieves, bums, hookers and con artists. Or simply forgotten men looking for trouble, keen to stamp their faded authority on whoever they could, in an effort to bolster their own low self esteem.

In essence – assholes.

And now there were five of them blocking the exit to the narrow alley.

'Lost are we, girly?' asked one of the men, his round face shiny with rain and his shaved head aglow from the neon lights.

'No thanks,' answered Emily. 'I'm fine.'

'Oh, American are we?' asked the man. 'Good. I like American girls.'

There was a chorus of appreciative laughter amongst the other men. A pack of hyenas. Followers.

They walked closer, spreading out as they came in order to block all possibility of escape.

Emily's enhanced senses could pick up their smell. A rank combination of stale beer and unwashed body odor. Her heart rate sped up, thumping frantically in her chest. Then she remembered that she was no ordinary girl. Not anymore. And if anyone in the alley should be nervous it certainly wasn't her.

She felt her anger well inside her and she started to walk towards the approaching thugs.

'Steady, girly,' quipped the leader. 'Bit keen aren't we?'

More moronic laughter echoed around the alley.

Emily took a few more steps until she was a mere two feet from the chief scumbag. 'So you wanna play?' she asked. The man looked a bit puzzled. And for the first time his arrogance slipped a little as Emily's supreme level of confidence washed over him.

Emily winked at him. 'Might as well,' she said. 'I mean, I'm in London to do the sights and kick some ass. And I've already done the sights for today.'

Her right hand whipped out in an open hand palm strike to the man's temple. His eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped to the ground. A puppet with its strings cut.

The laughter amongst his men died down as their limited cerebral capacity attempted to catch up with the rapidly changing flow of events.

Emily stood still and let her eyes run over the motley crew. 'Well then, boys,' she said. 'Who's next?'

Two men attacked at once. But to Emily it was as though they were moving in slow motion. Their movements sluggish and clumsy. Toddlers playing at being adults.

She didn't even bother to get technical with them and simply slapped them both on the side of their heads with her open hands.

Left. Right. Both of them flew backwards, hit the ground and lay still.

Whether they were unconscious or not did not enter into the equation. They had obviously both decided that, for them, the fight was most definitely over.

Then the next man made a mistake. His hand dipped into his jacket pocket and came out holding a stiletto. The six inch blade flashed silver in the overhead lights as he waved it from side to side in an effort to intimidate.

Emily shook her head. 'Put it away. Trust me,' she urged. 'You don't want to go there. Put it down and walk away. Fun's over.'

He jumped forward, leading with the blade, striving to cut. To wound.

Emily moved to the side, letting his knife arm slip past and then she swiveled, flicked her leg up and brought it crashing down on the man's right shoulder. She heard the collar bone splinter as her kick landed and she readied herself for another strike. But it wasn't necessary as he collapsed in a heap, the knife slipping from his nerveless fingers and skittering away into the gutter.

The final assailant put both his hands up, turned and ran. Leaving his wounded and broken companions to fare for themselves.

Emily spent a minute putting all of the unconscious men into the recovery position, ensuring that they were breathing freely and there was no possibility of their airways becoming obstructed.

Then she left the alley and hailed a cab to take her back to the apartment.

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Chapter 12

‘Over six hundred years of combined wisdom between the five of you and this is the result,’ said Radford Cromwell, the head of the *Nosferatu* Enforcers.

‘With all due respect, master,’ answered one of the Aspirants who knelt in front of the Enforcer. ‘We were told that the Sir William might have had the relic. We were simply searching for it.’

The Enforcer glided across the floor and stood in front of the kneeling Aspirant. He looked down at him, an expression of utter disgust on his face as his fangs extended, sliding past his lower lips.

‘With all due respect,’ he whispered. He bent down, his face now level with the terrified junior vampire.

‘You have no concept of what respect is, you worthless leech. Did I tell you to search the Emporium?’

The Aspirant shook his head.

‘Did Lord Byron instruct you to do it?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Correct. So why did you and your gaggle of moronic parasites break into a place that was covered by closed circuit television and then not even bother to remove the evidence?’

‘There was no way that the cameras could have identified us, my lord Enforcer,’ answered the Aspirant. ‘We moved far too fast.’

The Enforcer stood up. ‘Oh well. That’s fine then. Not a problem. Too fast for the cameras you say?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Faster than a human is capable of moving?’

‘Much faster, my lord,’ agreed the Aspirant.

The Enforcers hand flashed forward, claws extended. The razor sharp talons tore through the kneeling Aspirant’s neck, separating his head from his shoulders in one single mighty blow. The severed cranium bounced along the floor until it rolled to a stop against the wall with a dull thud.

Cromwell grabbed the next Aspirant by the neck and picked him up one handed. ‘And now, because of you swarm of cretins, somebody out there has photographic proof of someone, or something, that can move ten times faster than a human being.’

‘My Lord,’ rasped the Aspirant who was still suspended by his neck. ‘I am sure that they will merely think that the cameras have malfunctioned. No one will believe what they see.’

‘No one?’ bellowed Cromwell. ‘No, not “No One”. Most humans will not believe. But there are some that will. In fact there are some that will know exactly what they are seeing. And those are the very people that we do not want looking into what we are doing.’

‘With a casual shrug of his shoulders the Enforcer separated the Aspirant’s head from his shoulders. Tearing it off like he was plucking an over ripe fruit from a tree. He tossed both head and body aside before turning to the remaining two kneeling Aspirants.

‘Get out before I destroy you,’ he growled.

The two juniors sprang to their feet and ran from the room, their bodies a blur from the speed at which they moved.

Cromwell stood still for a while as he pondered. He wasn’t worried about Sir William as such. The man was a mere human. Weak. Nothing more than prey. No, he was more concerned about who else might see the CCTV footage. Namely – the Olympus Foundation.

It was true that they were no longer the force that they used to be a full century ago.

Their numbers had dropped as the vastly superior numbers of the brethren had slowly whittled away at them.

Oh, the house of Lord Byron had lost many hundreds, if not thousands, of brethren to the blades and bullets of the Shadowhunters.

But unlike them, vampires could beget more vampires. Whereas the Olympus Foundation was stuck with a slowly dwindling line of succession that was literally dying out.

But they could still cause untold problems, thought Cromwell to himself. Especially that disgusting old magician. He had been a thorn in the brethren’s side for centuries now. An unacceptable situation as far as the Enforcer was concerned. In fact, he continued to think, it was time to approach the Grand Master with the plan that Cromwell had been working on. A plan to eradicate these so called Shadowhunters and their despicable leader, once and for all.

A purge, as it were.

Cromwell smiled to himself. And his canines shone as white as innocence in the darkling light.

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Chapter 13

When she had arrived back at the apartment the night before, Emily had decided not to tell Bastian or Nathan about her run in with the thugs in Soho. No harm had been done to her and she was afraid that the men would overreact and put some sort of curfew on her.

'I got no girl clothes,' she said to no one in particular, as she entered the sitting room the next morning.

'What do you mean?' asked Nathan. 'You have clothes. That's what you wear every day.'

Emily rolled her eyes. 'I'm meant to be going on a date tonight and all I have is jeans and t-shirts or our black Shadowhunter outfits. I mean, they're pretty cool but I don't want to go out to some fancy place looking like I've just walked off the set of The Matrix.'

'Going out on a date?' asked Nathan. The surprise sounding clearly in his voice.

'Yeah,' confirmed Emily. 'What? You think that I'm too hideous to be invited out?'

'No,' Nathan shook his head. 'It's just that, well, who is he? Or she, whatever. You've only been in London for a day. How did this happen. Is it safe?'

'It's all cool,' interjected Bastian. 'Some posh nob who owns the Antique Emporium that we went to yesterday. You would know if you actually did any work instead of swanning about on your own private business instead.'

'I wasn't swanning about,' denied Nathan. 'I had stuff to do.'

'Sure,' countered Bastian as he stood up. 'Tell you what,' he said to Emily. 'Let's go out. You got a Foundation debit card; we'll use it to buy you some "Girl Clothes".'

'The card is not for frivolities,' snapped Nathan.

'Lighten up, dude. Stop being such a fassy-man. The girl needs some clothes and the Foundation got more money than god, so shut your pie hole, right?'

Nathan held his hands up. 'Fine then, whatever. But let it be known that I don't approve.' He stood up and went through to his room, slamming the door behind him.

'Wow,' exclaimed Emily. 'Who put a bug up his ass?'

Bastian grinned. 'I think our Canadian boy is jealous.'

'Of what?' asked Emily.

'Don't be so dense,' answered Bastian.

Emily blushed. 'Oh,' she said. 'But, we're just friends. I mean, I hardly even know him.'

'So? You don't know William either and you're going on a date with him.'

'That's different.'

Bastian shook his head. 'No. Not really. And you still haven't worked out how to control that blush response of yours.'

Emily stuck her tongue out.

'Charming,' laughed the Jamaican. 'Let's go.

We got some plastic to bend.'

Emily spent the rest of the day choosing clothes and accessories, helped by the surprisingly knowledgeable Jamaican. When she commented, he informed her that he had grown up as one of seven children. And he had been the only male.

When Emily had enquired where the rest of his family was now he had simply shaken his head. She could see by the look of anguish in his eyes that bad things had happened. She grasped his shoulder in mute understanding and he smiled back at her in appreciation of her sympathy.

That afternoon Emily arrived back at the apartment with three separate outfits complete with matching accessories and, after much deliberation, she decided on the one that she was going to wear that evening.

At half past seven she emerged from her bedroom, fully dressed and ready for the first date that she had ever had. Nerves chewed at her stomach and caused her heart to flutter madly in her chest and, for a moment, she actually contemplated calling the whole thing off.

She walked into the sitting room and stood still, waiting for some sort of comment from either Bastian or Nathan. Hoping that it would be complimentary.

Or at least not insulting.

Bastian stood up as she entered the room and he gave a long, low whistle. 'Hey, all de fruits are right, girl,' he said. 'Looking fine with a capital F.'

She wore a figure hugging, knee length white and red Ted Baker cocktail dress with a pair of red Christian Louboutin stilettos and a simple silver necklace with a red garnet tear drop crystal pendant. The ensemble was finished off with a small red Vivienne Westwood clutch bag in a textured glitter finish.

Emily giggled 'Thank you, Bastian.'

Nathan stood up. 'You look…' he hesitated. 'Stunning.'

Emily turned to thank Nathan but before she could he had already left the room and headed to his bedroom, once again slamming the door behind him.

Bastian shrugged and shook his head. 'Just ignore him,' he advised Emily.

Before Emily could answer there was a buzz from the lobby intercom. She went over to the screen and took a look. Standing next to the concierge was an old man with a chauffeur's cap on. The concierge spoke into the intercom. 'Ma'am, your ride is here.'

'I'll be down now,' confirmed Emily. 'Man,' she said as she left. 'What is it with this country, does everybody have a chauffeur?'

Bastian laughed. 'Hardly,' he answered. 'Have fun. Don't do anything that I would.'

'As if,' countered Emily as she stepped into the private elevator.

She and the chauffer went down and then she followed the ancient driver out of the building to the waiting car. William stood outside and waved to her as she approached.

He kissed her briefly on each cheek in the French fashion and then opened the door, holding her elbow as she slid onto the back seat. Then he walked around the back of the car and climbed in next to her. Meanwhile the chauffer had gotten behind the wheel and they pulled out into the traffic.

The car was a Bentley Continental R, a massive beast of an automobile, almost eighteen feet long and twelve feet wide. The interior was as plush as a gentleman's club and so silent that the only sound was the tick of the carriage clock that was sunken into the walnut paneling above the small bar.

William pushed a button and the strains of Miles Davis filled the cab, the sultry tones offsetting the nervous flutter that his brief kisses had set off in Emily's chest.

'Nice,' she said. 'Miles Davis, Porgy and Bess. Released March the 9th, 1959. This was one of his first modal compositions. Instead of soloing in the straight, conventional, melodic way, his new style of improvisation featured rapid mode and scale changes played against sparse chord changes. A real break from the norm.'

William raised an eyebrow. 'So, I take it that you are a huge jazz fan.'

'No, not really,' admitted Emily. 'It's just that I know stuff. Well, I remember stuff.

All sorts of stuff. Everything, actually.'

Emily realized that she was babbling but for the life of her she couldn't stop. It was like the words were tumbling out of her mouth in an attempt to sabotage her date by convincing the tall, good looking man next to her, that she was a complete airhead.

'Sorry,' she apologized. 'I'm prattling on. Must be nervous or something.'

William laughed. 'Do you get nervous on all of your dates?'

Emily shrugged. 'No. I mean, maybe. Not sure.

Actually, I've never been on a date before.'

Inwardly she cursed herself. *Great*, she thought. *Now he knows that you're a complete nerd and you've lived the life of a recluse. Darn it.*

'Well there's no reason to be nervous,' assured William. 'We're just two people going to get a bite to eat. You look really nice, by the way,' he continued. 'Smashing. So how come you've never gone on a date before?'

'It's a long story. Short version is, I lost my parents when I was quite young so I had to move in with two family friends. They were great but they lived in the middle of nowhere. No people, therefore, no dates.'

'I see, sorry about your parents. I too have lost mine.'

'Sucks, doesn't it. I mean, Bart and Ryoko are great. Really lovely, but they aren't my mum and dad. I miss my parents. Do you still miss yours?'

William shrugged. 'I lost them so very long ago. Decades.'

'Couldn't have been that long,' pointed out Emily. 'Hell, you can't be more than twenty three, twenty four.'

William scowled. 'Of course. I mean, it seems like decades. Years and years.'

'Yeah,' agreed Emily. 'Sometimes it does.'

The driver pulled over in front of a large, solid looking building on the banks of the river Thames. On the top of the edifice Emily could make out a sign that read OXO.

The chauffer opened the door for her and she followed William into the building.

When they exited the elevator on the top floor they were greeted by a young man in chefs' whites.

He bowed to William and then led them through the restaurant and into the kitchen. Then he showed them to a small table situated next to a plate glass window that overlooked the river, the lights of London diffused into smears of color from the light rain.

Another man came bustling up. He was also dressed in chefs' whites and he greeted William with a hug. William introduced him as Jeremy and the chef kissed the back of Emily's hand.

'Sit, sit, sit,' he urged. 'I bring food and wine. You relax.'

Within minutes a bottle of wine arrived and was presented to William. He glanced at the bottle and nodded his approval.

The sommelier opened it, tasted it using a *tastevin* that hung around his neck, poured a glass for each of them and left. Soon after, food began to arrive.

It was obvious that Jeremy was sending them whatever he thought worthy of their special attention. Scallops in a white wine reduction on a bed of pok choi, Slices of lobster in a truffle sauce, rare Kobe beef fillet with brandy cream, asparagus and wild mushroom risotto. Multiple small portions of exquisite culinary genius.

As the evening wore on, Emily found herself more and more at ease. William was the consummate host, charming and attentive as well as being a great raconteur.

It was only when the dessert of handmade chocolates arrived that Emily realized that she still knew very little about the handsome man sitting opposite her. Every question that she had asked had either been only superficially answered or gently deflected. He had told many entertaining stories but none of them were about

himself.

Over coffee and liqueurs she made a last concerted effort to pry some personal information out of William. But, once again, he replied in non sequiturs, or simply reversed the question so that she ended up talking about herself again.

In the end she gave up trying and, instead, simply reveled in his company as she enjoyed herself more than she had since she could ever remember.

Later that evening, when he dropped her back at the apartment, he had kissed her goodnight.

And when she climbed into bed she could still feel the touch of his lips against hers. Soft yet firm at the same time. As hot as fever and as cold as ice.

She smiled to herself as she slipped into slumber.

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Chapter 14

When Emily woke the next morning she found that she was alone in the apartment. Both Nathan and Bastian had gone out without leaving her a message. At a bit of a loose end, she spent the day training and then walking around the local area, doing her tourist thing once again.

As the sun was dropping below the skyline she headed back, looking forward to a coffee and something to eat.

When she got into the kitchen Nathan was already there, sitting at the table, hands clasped around a mug of steaming tea.

He glanced up at Emily as she walked in.

And for the briefest moment she was sure that she saw a look of pure hatred flash in his eyes.

But then he stood up and greeted her warmly, enquiring as to how her date had gone and she figured that she must have imagined it.

'Went great,' she smiled. 'William was a real gentleman. Good food, good company. Nothing wrong.'

'I'm glad,' returned Nathan. 'Look, I've come across a bit of info regarding the vamp break-in at the Emporium. I need to go and meet with an informant of mine, down at the docks near the Isle of Dogs. I don't know where Bastian has got to and I'd really appreciate some back up. Do you think that you could come along?'

Emily nodded. 'Sure, Happy to.'

'Excellent. Get a coffee, get something to eat and then we'll tool up and be on our way.'

Emily bolted down a huge bowl of fruit and nut muesli and a mug of coffee while Nathan went to the arms safe and took out a pile of weapons. He laid them on the table and pushed a selection across to Emily.

A Katana Japanese sword, two throwing knives, one strapped to each arm, and a heavy dagger to go on her belt. The Katana slipped into a specially designed shoulder rig so that it hung under her left arm, concealed by her leather jacket.

As usual, all of the bladed weapons were impregnated with silver.

'We won't take any firearms,' said Nathan. 'I don't really expect anything to go down and, anyway; we wouldn't want to start a firefight in the city.'

The two Shadowhunters took the elevator to the underground car park and Nathan showed Emily to a black Range Rover, pressing the key fob to unlock the doors as they walked towards it.

It took almost an hour to crawl through the city traffic and down to the Isle of Dogs. Nathan found a parking space in a tatty side street and then Emily followed him through a veritable maze of alleyways.

Above them loomed the massive glass and concrete edifices of the office blocks at Canary Wharf, diametrically contrasting with the narrow shabby streets around them. Nathan led the way to a row of Victorian terrace houses. They stood under a flickering street lamp and waited for Nathan's snitch to arrive, turning their collars up against the seemingly ever-present drizzle that permeated the London air.

Nathan kept shifting from foot to foot, eyes constantly searching the area around them. Ill at ease and nervous. Emily wondered why he was acting so anxious but put

it down to the fact that he must be worrying about his informant showing up.

After almost half an hour Nathan shook his head.

'He should have arrived by now,' he said.

'Look, can you stay here in case he pitches up? I'm going to have a scout around, see if I can find him. Okay?'

Emily nodded and leaned against the lamp post in an effort to make herself less uncomfortable as Nathan jogged off around the corner.

Without warning, the lamp above her shattered and the street went dark. Emily jumped but then figured that it was simply an old bulb giving up the ghost. Nevertheless her senses ratcheted up a few notches as her heart rate increased. Colors stood out as more vibrant, the sound of the people living in the wretched, dilapidated houses came across clearly, like they were talking next to her.

Then a strange smell accosted her nasal passages. An overlying hint of snow with an undercurrent of something rotten. Dead.

Out of the corner of her eye she sensed movement. A mere flicker. A shadow. She turned to look but it was gone. And then, appearing in front of her as if by magic, stood four figures. Dressed like her, all in black. Three men and a woman. Their faces as white as a shroud. Lips blood red and eyes like dead coals.

The one man smiled and Emily could plainly see his two large fangs sticking out an inch over his bottom lip.

She felt as though someone had just thrown a bucket of ice cold water over her. Her mind shrieked, telling her to run.

But her legs simply couldn't move. She was literally glued to the spot by an overwhelming feeling of terror.

Vampires.

She tried to call out to Nathan but her voice merely vanished in her throat.

The lead vampire shook his head. 'Goodness me,' he said. 'Has the mighty Olympus Foundation come to this? Taking on terrified little girls to become Shadowhunters.' He laughed and the other blood suckers joined in. Their lyrical laughter, proof that they were genuinely amused at how low the Foundation had sunk.

At how pathetic they thought the new Shadowhunter was.

'So this is what they think will stop us searching for the *corona potestatem?'* sneered the female vampire. 'I'm almost embarrassed for them.'

A wave of rage washed over Emily as she noted the scorn in the vampire's expressions.

'That's it, you Dracula wannabees,' she growled. 'I don't care who or what you are, I'm gonna be taking names and chopping heads off.'

She drew her Katana as she spoke and the silver coated blade shone in the wan moonlight, shimmering like it was magically charged.

The lead vampire hissed as he sensed the silver but still he moved forward. Emily kept the sword in front of her, tracking the vampire as he approached.

Then the other three blood suckers split up, one flanking to Emily's right and the other two to her left. She knew that they were all going to pounce at once and overwhelm her so she decided to take the fight to them instead and leapt forward, swinging her Katana in an overhead strike as she did so.

But the lead vamp moved out of the way with such breathtaking speed that Emily lost sight of him.

Remembering Bastian's advice, Emily kept moving, somersaulting forward and then rolling to her right as she hit the ground. She swung her blade again as she did so and felt a satisfying shock as the silver-steel cut into something. As she jumped to her feet again she saw the female vampire stagger away from her, gouts of blood jetting from her right arm.

She moved again, desperately scanning about as she tried to pick up where the other three vamps were but she wasn't quick enough and something seemed to explode against the side of her head.

She went down hard, rolling as she did but her vision blurred in and out of focus and she could feel blood trickling down from her temple and onto her cheek. She realized that one of the vamps must have punched or kicked her.

Emily whipped her Katana around her head, more in a desperate attempt to keep her attackers away than anything else.

The three unharmed vamps appeared in front of her once again and, out of the corner of her eye she noticed that the female was still bleeding but it appeared as if her cut was starting to heal.

Feelings of panic started to flutter on the edges of Emily's consciousness as she wondered what the hell she was going to do next. She was outnumbered and, as far as she could tell, outclassed by the bevy of blood suckers.

She moved again, pushing herself harder than she ever had before, dropping to the ground, rolling forward and coming up hard and fast, punching upwards with the katana as she did. The blade struck the lead vampire in the center if his stomach and penetrated all the way through his body, emerging from his back in a spray of deep red blood. But as he fell forward the sword was ripped out of Emily's grasp and she had to retreat, drawing her heavy dagger as she did so.

The skewered blood sucker glared at her as she skipped away from him. Then, with a grimace of pain on his face, he slowly pulled the sword from his torso and cast it aside.

'Now you've gone and pissed me off,' he spat. His voice a sibilant hiss of pure white hot anger. He coughed and blood splattered onto the pavement. Then he shook himself like a dog, threw his head back and howled. A high pitched keening sound that set Emily's teeth on edge and brought on an instant head ache.

A wave of pure terror washed over the young Shadowhunter as she realized that this was it. But then she immediately quashed the feeling, sucked in a lungful of air, and braced herself. If she was going to die then she was going to do her damndest to take out at least one of these disgusting human leeches before she did.

As one, the vampires attacked. Moving at blistering speed, with fangs and claws extended, ready to slash and tear and bite.

But just before they struck there was a flash of silver and the lead vampire's head leapt from his shoulders in a huge fountain of blood. A blur of shadow and the other three blood suckers were thrown back as something smashed into them. Emily breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that Nathan had come to her rescue but as she looked up she instantly saw that it was not her friend.

Instead, she saw another vampire, his fangs glistening in the moonlight, talons extended. In his right hand a slim razor-sharp rapier that dripped blood.

The remaining three vampires snarled and hissed as they prowled back and forth, eyeing the newcomer with trepidation.

Then he struck again, his movement a smear of darkness in the night. Talons tore open the female vampire's throat and the rapier finished off the job, slicing her head cleanly off.

The last two vamps turned to run but the newcomer leapt high into the air and came down on them, slashing downwards with his sword as he did, skewering the one blood sucker through his neck and deep into his torso. Then with a sickening crunch the newcomer jerked the blade from side to side, tearing open a massive wound that dropped the vamp to the ground. As he fell the newcomer grabbed his head and twisted it violently, ripping it off as he did so. Within seconds he had dispatched the final blood sucker in a similar fashion.

Then he stood and faced Emily.

The wind made his black cloak billow about him and the moonlight reflected off his deep green eyes. His long black hair hung down past his shoulders and his pale face was unshaven. His lips, full and sensual and as red as blood. His skin as pale as an angel of the grave.

He was quite possibly the sexiest man that Emily had ever seen in her life.

And then his eyes flashed and, with a whisper of air, he was gone.

Emily turned as she heard running footsteps. It was Nathan, sprinting down the road towards her. 'My god,' he shouted as he drew close and saw the carnage around his fellow Shadowhunter. 'What the hell? Are you alright?' He grabbed Emily by the shoulders, running his hands over her as he checked for any wounds.

'I'm fine' she answered in a shaky voice.

'Come on, let's get out of here,' responded Nathan as he dragged Emily back to their car. He opened the door for her and then he got into the driver's seat. Before he pulled off he took out his cell phone and made a call.

'Ambros, it's Nathan. We've had an incident. Belgrade Street, Isle of Dogs. Need clean up as soon as. Four bodies, vamps. They've been decapitated.' He paused for a few seconds and the spoke again. 'No, it was Emily,' he said. 'I'll get her back to the apartment. Speak to you later.'

Then, without further ado, Nathan, ended the call, started the car and set off back to St. Pancras.

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Chapter 15

Bastian slammed his fist down on the table, cracking the two inch thick Oak as if it were fine china. ‘What were you thinking?’ he shouted at Nathan. ‘She’s a bloody child and you put her in harm’s way. Why did you leave her there?’

‘She survived,’ countered Nathan with a sulky look on his face. ‘Not sure how, but no harm no foul.’

‘Jesus, Nathan. Don’t be so blasé about this. You took an amateur into a battle zone.’

‘I didn’t know that it was a battle zone. I thought that she’d be fine.’

‘Hey guys,’ interrupted Emily. ‘I am right here you know. Don’t I get a say in this. Also, Bastian, I’m not a child.’

The Jamaican shook his head. ‘You’re eighteen years old. Nathan and I are both over one hundred years older. You *are* a child.’

Emily stuck her tongue out at him. ‘Look, Bastian, I’m fine. Thanks for the concern but it worked out okay. So let’s drop it.’

Bastian pointed at Nathan. ‘I’m not happy, Nathan,’ he said. ‘This isn’t over. You and I need to go round and round for a while.’

‘Up yours,’ retaliated Nathan. ‘You don’t get to tell me what to do. None of you get to do that. There was a time when kings and presidents hung on my every word, and now I have a Jamaican street thug telling me off. You’re all a pathetic bunch of losers. Stuff you, Bastian,’ shouted Nathan as he stormed off, slamming the door behind him.

‘Man, talk about over reacting,’ said Bastian. ‘And that door slamming is beginning to become a bit of a habit as well.’ He turned to look at Emily, holding his gaze on her for a full minute, until she began to feel really uncomfortable and looked away. ‘How did you survive?’ he asked.

Emily shrugged. ‘Just lucky, I suppose.’

‘One vamp, yep. Pretty sure that you could take one.. Two, probably not. Maybe with a lot of luck. But four, no ways.’

‘Well thanks for your total lack of confidence in me,’ returned Emily.

‘It’s not that,’ said Bastian. ‘But Ambros just got hold of me. The clean up team took the bodies to the manor house. Two of the vamps were real old. Well over six, seven hundred years. I can assure you; even I would have trouble taking out those two, let alone all four of them. So, how did you do it?’

Emily shrugged again.

‘Come on, Emily. What aren’t you telling? Seriously, talk to me.’

Haunting images of burning green eyes filled Emily’s mind. And lips, red, kissable. *Damn it,* she thought as she cursed herself. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

Bastian was still staring at her. Awaiting an answer.

In desperation Emily said the first thing that came into her head. ‘Umm – what is the *corona potestatem?’*

Bastian did a double take. ‘What? Where did you hear that?’

‘One of the vamps said it. He told me that they were going to kill me to stop me looking for the *corona potestatem.* Which is a bit dumb because I don’t even know what it is.’

The Jamaican sat down, took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one.

'Hey,' complained Emily. 'No smoking indoors. Anyway, I don't care what you say, those are bad for you. Coffin nails.'

Bastian's lips twitched up in a tiny smile. 'Come on, Em. I could drink battery acid and smoke crack cocaine and it wouldn't kill me. You know that crap like that doesn't affect us.'

'Well it's still a gross habit. And…Em?'

Bastian shrugged. 'You don't like being called Em?'

Emily thought about it for a few seconds and then grinned. 'You know what? It's not bad. I've always been the full Emily but Em is fine. Anyway, this *corona potestatem* thing. Fess up, dude.'

'It's a myth. Doesn't exist.'

'Cool, so a bunch of bloodsuckers want to kill me over something that doesn't exist. Come on Bastian.'

Bastian took a drag of his cigarette and blew a series of perfect smoke rings into the air. 'I'm not sure exactly what it's supposed to be. Some say it's a crown, some a ring. Whatever, the myth dates back many hundreds of years. The upshot of the whole thing is that this object, the *corona potestatem,* is meant to be able to give vampires the ability to walk in the daylight. It makes them immune to the sun. Not only that, it protects them against silver and, apparently, frees them from the need to drink human blood. Which means that they would become pretty close to invincible.'

Emily shrugged. 'So? I mean if it only works on one vamp at a time, what's the big deal? We could still take him out, surely?'

'The big deal. Em, is that the only thing that stops a vamp being right at the top of the food chain is the fact that he has so many inherent weaknesses. Yin and yang. Balance. He has speed, strength, rejuvenation, immortality. Not to mention their capacity to glamour people into doing their bidding. But against them we have the power of light and silver. A vamp who is a daywalker is a big problem. I mean – he could become president of the United States if he wanted. Who could stop him? How could any normal human resist his glamour?'

Em nodded. 'Okay. So this is bad then?'

'Yeah. But fortunately, we've all been searching for this so called *corona potestatem* for hundreds of years now and Ambros is pretty convinced that it doesn't exist. Or, if it ever did then it has been irretrievably lost. Still, if the vamps are seriously hot for it and they're willing to openly go to war over it then, regardless of whether it actually exists or not – it's a problem. I reckon that we pack up and head back to the big house. We need to talk to Ambros and the rest of the troops.'

Em nodded her agreement.

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Chapter 16

Ambros, Bastian and Emily sat in the old man's study. Nathan had stayed on in London, giving 'personal reasons' as his excuse not to return to the manor house.

'Sir William knows more than he's letting on,' said Ambros.

'I reckon that's true,' agreed Bastian. 'The vamps wouldn't randomly trash his place for no reason. They were looking for something that he has. And it's ten to one that he knows what it is.'

'No,' interjected Em. 'I spent an evening with him and I didn't get any hint that he was hiding something.'

'I see,' said Ambros. 'So you got to know him quite well then?'

'Well, no,' admitted Em. 'Not so much.' She thought for a while. 'To be honest, actually, he was pretty good at avoiding any questions about himself. He has a way of turning every question around so that you end up talking about yourself all night.'

'So what you're saying is, you didn't get to know him quite well then,' continued Ambros.

Em nodded. 'I suppose I didn't.'

'Can you get to see him again?' asked Ambros. 'I mean, socially, not in an official capacity.'

'Probably,' said Em. 'I've got his cell number; I could give him a call.'

'Do it now,' instructed the old man.

Emily left the room before she called, in order to have a little privacy and Ambros continued speaking to Bastian.

'This whole incident with Nathan,' said Ambros. 'The vamp attack and Emily managing to kill them all.'

'What about it?' asked Bastian.

'Give me your thoughts.'

The Jamaican shook his head. 'The first thing that springs to mind is – how the hell did the vamps know that Emily and Nathan were there?'

'I agree. All that I can think is that the vamps had someone following them. It's not exactly a secret that we own the St. Pancras flat.'

'True,' confirmed Bastian. 'Then, secondly, either Em is not telling us something or she's far better than I've given her credit for. I mean, two of the blood suckers were elders. Powerful. And the others were no Aspirants. I can't help thinking that she couldn't have bested them all so easily. She hardly had a mark on her. Didn't ring true.'

'What did Nathan have to say?'

'Nothing. He said that by the time he got there it was all over. Four headless blood vamps. Emily's sword had been blooded so, maybe it was her.'

'Logically, who could have helped her?' asked Ambros. 'Think about it. Unless they turned on each other. No human could have helped. They simply wouldn't have had the strength or speed to affect the outcome. *Id est*, it must have been her.'

'Occam's razor,' agreed Bastian. 'The simplest answer is usually the correct one. I suppose that she got lucky. There is more,' he added. 'She said that one of the vamps mentioned the *corona potestatem.'*

Ambros paled visibly and then he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes for a

few seconds. ‘Not again,’ he whispered. ‘I thought that they had given up on that.’

‘No real worries,’ said Bastian. ‘It doesn’t actually exist so they can search all they want. As long as they don’t think that we have it and start a war because of that. Actually,’ he continued. ‘I’d give good odds that the vamps were looking for it at Sir Williams place. Makes sense. More fools them.’

‘Just because no one has found it for so long doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist,’ countered Ambros. ‘It simply means that it hasn’t been found. But even if it did there is no ways that it would simply be lying about in a random antique shop. That’s just too ridiculous to countenance.’

‘So are you saying that it does exist?’ questioned Bastian.

Before Ambros could answer, Emily reentered the room, a smile on her face. ‘Got hold of William. He’s back at his estate in Kent. He invited me there to stay over for a night or two. I’m going to catch the train and his man will pick me up at the station.’

‘We shall talk later,’ said Ambros to the Jamaican, *sotto voce*. Then he turned to Emily. ‘Good,’ he affirmed. ‘Now remember, this is not just a social visit. Find out what the hell is going on.’

Emily nodded. ‘I’ll do my best.’

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Chapter 17

Head of the United Kingdom House of the *Nosferatu*, Lord Chelsea Byron, had long since lost the ability to feel remorse, or fear, or love. However, the last thousand years had honed his ambition to the point where it superseded all else. And so, even though he wasn't scared *per se*, he was nervous.

Because opposite him sat Janus Augusta, head of the Italian house and also the *Capo di tutt'i capi,* the supreme leader, of the entire World Vampire Federation.

Augusta had been born around 100BC and even for a vampire he was considered to be ancient. He sat in the leather wingback, his spine bent over almost double.

A network of throbbing purple veins stood out clearly on his hairless skull, as they did all over his body.

His fangs stood out on a permanent basis, at least four inches long and stained yellow with age. Uncut fingernails arched away from his fingers, so long that they literally curled back on themselves, preventing him from doing even the simplest of tasks for himself, a habit that he affected to show that he had servants for everything.

But his eyes belied his frail appearance, Deep red in color and filled with a bottomless well of inhuman insanity. A pure madness brought on by living for far too long. A psychosis that can only come from having lost every friend, lover and companion that he had ever had. Thousands and thousands of years of bereavement and sorrow. A veritable litany of loss.

And with it came a hatred of all that was human.

When he spoke his voice was so sibilant and quiet that, had his audience not had the hyper-sensitive hearing of the undead, they would not have been capable of hearing him.

'It is a shard of the true sword,' he said.

'After Sir Bedivere cast Excalibur into the lake, the Lady of the Lake, a succubus by the name of Nimue, destroyed the weapon, smashing it into pieces and flinging the shards into the deepest ocean.

But she retained one piece. A piece large enough to fashion a ring. This ring she gifted to Sir Lancelot. It was known as 'The Ring of Dispell' and it dispelled any enchantments. It is this ring that we seek. It is this artifact that shall give the *Nosferatu* wearer the power to become a Daywalker.'

'For many centuries we have searched for the relic,' said Lord Byron. 'How is it that we have only now learned that it is the fabled ring of Lancelot? Rumor has it as many different articles ranging from Solomon's crown to the Holy Grail.'

'Do you question me?' hissed Augusta.

Byron dropped to one knee before he replied. 'Never, my king. I merely enquire as to how we learned of its existence.'

'*We* did not,' replied the ancient vampire. '*I* did. And that is most likely due to the fact that I alone have been searching for it longer than anyone or anything on this earth.'

'A level one Familiar recently told us of rumors that pointed to a human, Sir William Townsend,' responded Byron. 'A dealer in antiquities. It was alleged that he had come across a relic of great power. However, some of my Aspirants searched his premises and found nothing.'

‘I have already heard about this,’ interjected the *Capo di tutt'i capi.*

‘Did the morons that work for you not think that any antiques shop of any value is bound to have many items with some sort of power in it?

We all know that age itself can bring power to an object. If we all merely romped about ransacking places with antiquities in, where would we be? I also heard that they left evidence of their deed on camera for all to see. And now those infernal Shadowhunters are poking their filthy noses in our business.’

‘That is true, my King,’ agreed Byron. ‘However, I did punish the Aspirants involved. I put two of them to the true death.’

Augusta sneered. ‘You have grown soft, Lord Byron. See to it that the other Aspirants involved are also beheaded.’

Byron nodded. ‘Of course, sire. It shall be done.’

‘I know,’ affirmed the ancient one. ‘Now, tell me of your other blunders.’

‘What blunders, my liege?’

The *Capo* hissed. ‘Do not play with me, child,’ he commanded. ‘I know all. You insult me by performing parlor games. Four of your elder brethren have been killed. What happened?’

Byron flinched. He had thought that he had covered his tracks; however, once again, he had underestimated the leader’s power and influence. ‘There is a new Shadowhunter, my king,’ he said. ‘A mere child, only newly come into her powers. I sent four Enforcers to kill her, thinking that it might discourage the Foundation from looking any deeper into our affairs.’

‘And what happened?’

‘She killed them, sire.’

‘How is that possible?’ asked the ancient vampire.

Byron shook his head. ‘Truly, I have no idea. Our informant assured us that, while she was talented, there was no way that she could best four of our top exterminators. It is a mystery.’

‘Did she receive help?’ enquired Augusta.

‘Our informant says not. Apparently she did it herself.’

Augusta nodded. ‘Interesting. Find out more about this new Hunter. Report back to me when you know everything about her. Lineage, history…everything.’

Lord Byron got off his knee and bowed deeply. ‘As you command, so shall it be done.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Augusta. ‘That is true. And I advise you never to forget that, Lord Byron. Now leave me, I grow hungry. Send me a Familiar. Someone young. Preferably male. A boy if you have.’

Byron bowed again and left the room.

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Chapter 18

William's stately home, Taunton Abbey, was situated a couple of miles outside of the port town of Dover in Kent. His ancient driver had picked Emily up from Dover station and driven her to the residence. Truth be told, she was expecting a huge pile similar to the Foundation headquarters. But William's place was very different.

A long, marble chip driveway led to a house that wasn't quite as large as the Foundation but was still magnificent. However, where Pankhurst Manor was all gargoyles and mullions, the Abbey was all light stone and glass. Hundreds of leaded windows reflected the sun and, instead of grotesques, the roof line was decorated with stone filigree, cherubs and angels.

The only jarring point was a huge wolf's head carved above the main door, its jaws open wide, canines exposed and eyes staring madly ahead. Underneath, in Latin, *Vitae Passus Est.*

Em assumed that it was the family motto. "Life is Suffering". She suppressed a shudder. The whole thing was incongruous when compared to the bright and beautiful surrounds.

The car pulled up in front of the sweeping steps that led to the front entrance and the chauffer clambered out, tottered around and opened her door for her. Waiting at the top of the stairs stood William, his tousled hair a mess like he had just left it that way when he got out of bed that morning. But, as usual, the rest of him was immaculate. Olive moleskin trousers, Burman walking boots, a tan Orvis bush shirt and a sleeveless Shoffel shooting gilet in a dark chestnut.

He looked like a walking palette of autumnal shades.

He smiled and Emily felt her heart leap. Then he strode down the stairs towards her and enveloped her in a huge hug. She could feel the heat of his body and it felt almost unbearably hot, as if he had a fever. His rangy muscles felt like steel hawsers as she pressed up against him. And his smell was masculine and comforting at the same time. A heady mixture of grass and ozone and leather and soap.

Then he suddenly pulled back and let his arms drop to his sides.

'Oh,' he exclaimed. 'I'm so sorry. What do you think of me? Manhandling you like that. I must apologize, it's just that, well, I was so pleased to see you. Got carried away, don't you know?'

Emily laughed. 'Don't be silly. I don't mind.

Actually, it was nice; I'm also pleased to see you.'

William's smile returned two fold as his obvious pleasure at her response painted itself across his face.

'Splendid,' he retorted. 'Awfully good. Well, the chaps will take the luggage up to your room. Chef has prepared us a light lunch, then perhaps I could take you on a little tour of the estate?'

Emily was pleased to see that William's concept of a light lunch was so far off the mark as to be ludicrous. The table literally groaned under the weight of roast pheasant, slabs of home cured ham, stuffing, potatoes and vegetables.

Ravenous as usual she piled her plate high and ate with gusto. William ate in the same fashion, consuming even more than Emily's Shadowhunter hungry metabolism and she wondered how he managed to stay in such good shape. With that calorific

intake, she thought, he should be the size of Lyle. But she decided that discretion would be the better part of valor and deigned to ask him how he stayed so ripped when he ate enough to sustain four normal men.

True to his word, William showed her around the estate after lunch. She immediately fell in love with the place.

Rolling manicured lawns stretched for acres, leading down to the sudden drop of cliffs that overlooked the English Channel. To her right she could see the White Cliffs of Dover; resplendent in the cold English sun as they reflected the light off their unbelievably white surfaces.

Copses of Oaks dotted the landscape and, scattered about the estate were random buildings that seemed to have no purpose other than decoration.

William called them Follies, and they ranged from the Beacon Tower, a fifty five foot high tower, to the Faux castle, a huge façade of a medieval castle that stretched some five hundred feet from end to end, its purpose merely to improve the view from the main ballroom of the manor house.

'You don't have any livestock,' noted Emily as they walked about the estate.

'How do you mean?' asked William.

'No horses. No sheep, cows. I'd have expected livestock. I mean, I know that it's not a farm but I thought that all English gentlemen had horses.'

William laughed. 'Well, not this one. Don't really like them and they can't stand me. Must be a family trait,' he continued. 'As far as I can remember, the Townsends have never ridden to the hounds or kept livestock or pets of any sort. Not even dogs.'

They wandered back to the house and William walked Emily through most of the formal rooms, withdrawing rooms, ballrooms, dining rooms. Each one more spectacular than the last.

Eventually Em started to experience a sort of luxury-overload. William picked up that she had seen about all that anyone could take in during one visit.

'Tell you what,' he said. 'I've got a few phone calls that I have to make before the market closes. Why don't I show you to the library, you can nose around there for a while and when you've had enough, pull one of the bell-cords and a chap will come and show you to your room? We'll be eating in tonight, so there's no need to dress but I'm sure that you shall want to avail yourself of the bathroom and such.'

Em smiled her agreement and, a few minutes later, she was alone in a magnificent library. She wandered around, not looking for anything specific, simply looking. She was surprised to find that, as well as many thousands of leather bound musty old tomes, there were hundreds of more contemporary books. Ranging from Hemmingway through to Lee Child.

She picked a few up and thumbed through them. They were all first additions and most had been signed and dedicated.

She picked up a first addition of The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde.

It was dated 1890 and when she opened it she saw that it was dedicated and signed by the great man himself. *To my Darling William*, it read. *Your munificence is overshadowed only by your compassion. Your friend forever, Oscar.*

Emily smiled to herself. Obviously William's great-grandfather had been christened William as well.

Next, an original copy of Shakespeare's Macbeth caught her eye. *Man*, she said to herself. *This must be worth a pretty packet.*

Once again it was dedicated by the author. William, remember always; 'He is mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf'. With love and respect from your namesake, the other William.

Em did a few figures in her head and worked out that all of the male Townsends for the last few hundred years must have all been called William. She raised an

eyebrow. *Wow, family get togethers must have gotten confusing,* she mused.

She meandered down the room and eventually found herself in a low-ceilinged section. Here the books seemed older than all of the others. But despite their obvious age they were well preserved and, unlike many of the other books that she had walked past, seemed so devoid of dust that they must have been fairly regularly used.

She ran her fingers along the shelf, reading the titles out to herself as she did.

The Book of Abramelin the Mage. The Ars Notoria.

Pseudomonarchia Daemonum. 'The false monarchy of demons,' translated Emily to herself. She took it down and flicked through it. The English was archaic and difficult to read but the book was basically a compendium from the 16th century, dictating the names of the sixty-nine major demons. *Weird*, she observed. *Wonder why he reads these?*

After a moment's thought, Em came to the conclusion that the books must be collectable as far as William's business was concerned and, with that minor mystery solved, she found the bell-cord and gave it a yank.

Shortly after that an old retainer arrived and showed her to her room.

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Chapter 19

The evening meal had been fantastic and now Emily and William sat in the small withdrawing room. A fire crackled and spat in the massive fireplace and filled the area with a gorgeous mellow light.

William had poured a brace of liqueurs for the two of them. Something called Benedictine. The bottle looked hand blown and when Em looked at the label she could see the date of distillation, 1820. The drink was almost two hundred years old, she realized with a shock as she took a sip. The flavor was intriguing, unusual more than delicious.

'This bottle was made for me in the 18th century by a monk by the name of Francesco De Guilamme,' said William.

'From the Benedictine Abbey of Fecamp in Normandy. You can see here, on the label.' He pointed. 'The initials, DOM. Stands for *Deo Optimo Maximo*.'

'To God, most good, most great,' translated Emily.

William smiled. 'Correct. So, you are a linguist as well as a jazz expert.'

Emily didn't react; she simply stared at the young man for a few seconds. Finally she spoke. 'For you,' she said.

'What?' responded William.

'You said that the monk made it for you.'

'Did I?'

'Yes,' she affirmed. 'You did.'

'How silly of me,' said William. 'After all, that was over two hundred years ago.' He held the bottle up. 'Some more?'

Emily was about to refuse but when she looked at her glass she saw that she had finished her first tot so she held out her glass for a refill.

'I saw some interesting books in your library,' she said. 'Particularly at the end of the room in that low ceilinged area.'

'Ah, yes,' acknowledged William. 'The occult section.'

'Do you read any of those?'

'From time to time,' admitted William. 'Some of them are rather fascinating. Hard going though, mainly being in Latin.'

'Have you ever come across any mention of the *corona potestatem*?'

William frowned. 'The Crown of Power. I have read many stories, take your pick.'

'You tell me,' insisted Emily.

'The saying goes – He who wears the Crown of Power shall rule over all. But there is no definitive work saying what the Crown actually is. Many say that it is merely the assumption of power, not an actual crown. Like the presidency or a potentate of some sort. Some say that it was the crown of Aragon, others, that it was a ring worn by the Prince of Wallahia, Vlad the third. Or, as most people know him, Vlad the Impaler.'

Emily gasped. 'Dracula?'

'The same,' admitted William. 'Count Vladimir Dragwlya. Count Dracula.'

'The vampire.'

William laughed. 'Folklore and peasant superstition,' he said. 'There are no such things as vampires. Granted, Vladimir was a complete psycho. Killed hundreds of

thousands of people. Although, by all accounts his younger brother was quite a nice chap. He went by the moniker of Radu the Handsome.'

'Wow, no wonder Vlad was pissed,' noted Emily. 'His brother gets "Handsome" and Vlad gets "Impaler". I'd also be a little peeved.'

William laughed again. 'True, but it didn't make him a vampire. That was all due to the Irish author, Bram Stoker in 1897.

He didn't invent the vampire but he definitely gave it its modern interpretation. He simply took Vlad's inherent evil and enhanced it by making him a vampire.'

'So, no *corona potestatem*?' asked Emily.

William shook his head. 'Afraid not. Still, that should help you sleep better at night. No vampires, no ghouls and no monsters to disturb your slumber.'

The young Sir walked Emily to her room. When they got there he folded her into his arms, and hugged her tenderly. Then he kissed her on the lips. A soft, lingering kiss that rooted the Shadowhunter to the floor and threatened to take away her ability to stand on her own two legs.

And then he was gone.

Emily lay awake for ages, comfortable and warm but just on the edge of sleep. The full moon shone through the window and bathed all in a magical blue light that competed with the warm glow of the fire.

She got up off the bed and walked over to the window, staring out at the moon-drenched landscape. Ornamental bushes pruned into spheres and pyramids, a wide stone pathway leading to an arboretum of mixed trees. Conifers, Willows and Oaks, their leaves and branches bleached to dark blues and grays by the moon's luminescence.

A sudden movement amongst the trees caught her eye.

A shadow loomed and then disappeared. She concentrated on the area, scanning from left to right, searching for another glimpse of whatever it was that had attracted her attention.

And then she saw it. A fleeting glance of no more than a fraction of a second as it moved through the trees, running with unbelievable speed and grace.

The largest wolf that she had ever seen. Easily as tall as a horse.

Emily searched again but could see no further sign of it. And after a minute or more of fruitless staring, she began to doubt her own eyesight. The wolf, if indeed that was what it was, had been impossibly large. Surely it must have been a trick of the light. Probably a stray dog, or fox even. The moon had simply cast a large shadow that had rippled through the trees and made it look like a huge running wolf.

Yes, that must be it, she debated with herself.

She went back to bed and lay down. But, as the night wore on and before she found sleep, she knew deep down that what she had seen was no illusion.

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Chapter 20

Lord Byron stared out of the window. The garden was lit by a gibbous moon and, to his immortal eyes it was as if it were the brightest summer's day. If he concentrated slightly he could hear the field mice scurrying though the long grass, the fox in his den and the soft whisper of a badger slipping through the brush.

Above he sensed an owl and, just for a moment, he melded his mind with that of the nighttime raptor and spent a few seconds looking at the earth from a height of over two hundred feet.

He could also smell the human that stood behind him.

He could hear the rushing of his blood, the breath hissing in and out of his lungs, the thud of his heartbeat. And from these physiological signs he could judge the human's emotions.

As always he was surprised. There was little or no fear there. Heart rate slightly elevated. Breathing normal. Stance comfortable but still respectful. Not relaxed but calm. The only emotion that came off the human in such strong waves that it was almost a palpable thing, was its ambition. And its lust for power and respect.

He turned to face him.

'Young Nathan Tremblay,' he said. 'This is our third meeting yet still I struggle to fully accept your new found loyalty to the *Nosferatu*. I ask myself, why would a Shadowhunter change ships in such a drastic fashion. Why would one throw away a hundred years of a chosen profession just like that?' he snapped his fingers to accentuate his point.

Nathan bowed his head in acknowledgement to the vampire's concerns. 'I understand, my lord,' he said. 'But you must know, being a Shadowhunter was never a chosen profession.

I was born into it, much as a slave is born into his role in life. It was an assumption made by genetics. However, it was never something that I felt strongly about. What gives one faction the right to decide that another is evil?

What makes the Olympus Foundation correct? It is mere semantics.

And, for many years, I was relatively happy with my lot. As a Hunter we were revered. Respected amongst the upper echelons of government and high society. But those days have long passed. Nowadays to gain respect one has to be a reality television star, or a victim with a story of abuse and exploitation. A woman giving birth to her child on national television, or a mediocre singer with a sorry childhood. Talent has become a misnomer and fame has taken the place of true worth. And for this we are expected to lay down our lives? Truth be told, my lord, modern society sickens me. Humanity needs to be controlled and who better to do that than the *Nosferatu?'*

'So, my child,' said Byron. 'You seek power?'

'I have made no secret of that, my lord,' agreed Nathan.

Byron stood silent for a while. 'You have shown your loyalty, I suppose,' he conceded. 'You did help to set up the destruction of your colleague, Miss Hawk. However, you blundered by hopelessly underestimating her capabilities and that mistake cost the lives of four of our brethren.'

'And for that I am most distressed, my lord. I had no idea that she was so

proficient.'

'Even more reason that she must be taken out,' said Byron.

'Yes, sire,' agreed Nathan. 'And as I have informed you, she is now with the English nobleman, Sir William.

This time the team that you are sending to assure her demise will be successful. No single being could stand against ten brethren; even if some of them are mere Grinders.'

Byron smirked. 'Do not underestimate the raw strength of the Grinders,' he advised. 'They may be simple but their power and dedication is nothing to be sneered at.'

'I meant no offense, master,' assured Nathan. 'I am also confident that the rest of the members of the Foundation shall see their lives end tonight,' he continued. 'I have given the Enforcer the codes to the doors and gates of Pankhurst Manor as well as the whereabouts of the cameras and alarms. The team that he is sending there will definitely take the Shadowhunters by complete surprise. Their end is indeed nigh.'

Again the LordByron stood silent. Contemplating.

Finally he spoke. 'Yes,' he said. 'I have decided. You have proved your faithfulness and devotion to the brethren, beyond any doubt. The ceremony shall take place tonight. While the Enforcer teams are out destroying the Olympus Foundation, we shall be creating a fresh life for our newest member. Our first ex-Shadowhunter. The *Nosferatu* Nathan Tremblay.

And Nathan fell to his knees in supplication to his new master.

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Chapter 21

Emily and William had taken an early dinner and now, once again, Em was walking through the endless rooms of the manor house. Exploring while William made his night time calls to the various markets around the world.

This time she found herself in yet another massive reception room, the walls filled with large oil paintings of the Townsend men throughout the ages.

And every one of them looked remarkably like William. Or, she supposed, to be more accurate, he looked like them.

She was looking at one portrait in particular. Major William Townsend circa 1815. Dressed in a scarlet, long tailcoat with a gold star on each shoulder. Tight fitting white tights, long black boots, a saber, a flintlock and a bicorne hat. The resemblance was uncanny, right down to the shy smile and the muscular build.

As Emily was staring, one of the ancient retainers walked by the open door, she peered in and smiled, an almost toothless grin.

'Good evening, young miss,' she said. 'I see that you are admiring the paintings of the master.'

'Yes,' smiled Emily. 'I must say, the family resemblance is remarkable.'

The old lady looked puzzled. 'I'm not sure that I understand, my lady. The master has always looked like that. As you can see in that one there,' she pointed at the painting of the major. 'That's always been one of my favorites. That was done just after he returned from the war after giving that Napoleon chap a good drubbing.'

Emily raised an eyebrow. 'I'm sorry, what are you saying?'

'The master,' repeated the old servant. 'He's looked just like that for as long as I can remember and I've been in his service for over seventy years now.'

Emily did a double take. 'But that's impossible,' she said, her face pale with shock.

'Oh dear,' wailed the old lady. 'You didn't know. Oh dear…it's not my fault,' she cried. 'The master didn't warn us. He should have told. Oh that naughty man.'

Right then William walked in. He took a look at Emily's face and then old lady and he sighed.

'I'm so sorry master,' wailed the old girl. 'You didn't tell us that she didn't know.'

William smiled. 'Don't worry, Winifred, I'll take care of this. You go make sure that Emily's fire in her bedroom is lit.'

Winifred bowed, shuffled off and closed the door as she left, her face a picture of contrition.

Emily's expression, on the other hand, was a combination of righteous anger and disappointment.

'Right,' she said, her voice husky with emotion. 'You had better do some bloody quick explaining Sir William, or whatever your name is. And this had better be good.'

'Look, Emily,' stated William. 'It's not what you think.'

'How do you know?' shouted Emily. 'How could you possibly know because you don't know what I'm thinking you… ?' She searched for a suitable word. 'You – bum hole.'

William stopped mid flow and raised an eyebrow. 'Really? Bum hole?'

Emily shrugged. 'I'm not good with swear words,' she admitted.

‘But, bum hole,’ repeated William. ‘It’s so juvenile.’

‘Oh I’m so sorry,’ quipped Emily. ‘We can’t all be twenty thousand years old,’ she pointed at the paintings as she answered. ‘We can’t all have been alive since the bloody dinosaurs. Some of us are just infantile, immature babies who’ve only been alive for eighteen years.’ She stamped her foot. ‘You shit head.’

William nodded. ‘Well, okay. As far as cussing goes, that one was a little better. Listen, my dearest,’ he continued. ‘I promise that I can explain. But first there are a few things that I need to show you.’

He held out his hand and waited for Emily to take it.

After a few seconds she shook her head. ‘No holding hands,’ she said. ‘First you explain. And then I decide if I ever want to talk to you again. Ever.’

‘Right,’ conceded William. He rolled his head on his neck, took a deep breath to prepare. And then he stopped and stood stock still, head tilted to one side, eyes squinted in concentration.

‘What?’ asked Emily. ‘What’s wrong?’

Without answering William sniffed the air like a dog, moving his head from side to side as he did so.

‘Okay,’ stated Emily. ‘This is getting creepy. What the hell is going on?’

‘Dammit,’ growled William. ‘What the hell are they doing here?’ He turned to face Emily. ‘Look, we’re going to have to talk about this later. We have a big problem. Quickly, you need to hide.’

‘Wait,’ demanded Emily. ‘Who is here? You had better tell me what the hell is going on or I’m not going anywhere. And don’t think that you can get out of an explanation by simply coming over all weirdo on me.’

William grabbed her by the arm. ‘I’m sorry, Em,’ he said. ‘But it’s for your own safety.’ He started to walk off, pulling her by the arm. But instead, Emily pulled back, lifting him off his feet and yanking him back towards her.

He looked at her with an astonished expression on his face. ‘What the…? That’s impossible. No one that size can be that strong.’

‘Well obviously that assumption isn’t correct,’ snapped Emily. ‘So I advise you to start doing some explaining and quickly.’

William shook his head. ‘I’m sorry, my darling,’ he said sadly. ‘But it’s too late.’

As he spoke the door burst open.

Ten vampires stalked into the room, their fangs already extended, lips pulled back and claws bared.

Emily sprinted to the wall and pulled off a saber that was mounted next to one of the paintings. She ran her thumb along the blade and was pleased to see that it was still sharp.

‘Get behind me,’ she shouted at William as she moved towards the blood suckers.

The group of vamps laughed as they fanned out and advanced on her, hissing and screeching.

Then next to her she heard a tremendous roar and the vamps pulled back in surprise. Emily turned to look at the source of the savage noise to see William tearing his shirt off as he rapidly swelled in size. Hair started to sprout from his body and, as she watched, his face elongated, growing a muzzle and fangs.

He fell to all fours as the final remnants of his clothing were rent from him.

And suddenly there was no longer William. Instead, there stood a wolf the size of a horse.

He threw back his head and howled. The sound affected Emily on a visceral level. An atavistic call of the wild.

Without warning the wolf sprang forward and, moving with unbelievable grace and speed, he attacked the vampires. He landed on top of the leading vamp and, with a savage wrench, tore the creature’s head off with one blood drenching bite.

Using the vampires' confusion, Emily leapt into the fray, brandishing the blade with all of her Shadowhunter enhanced strength. The old blade wasn't silver coated but it could still chop heads off, if wielded with enough power. And Emily was possessed of that power.

She lopped off a blood suckers head and then spun onwards, moving all of the time.

Striking and cutting without pause or conscious thought as she moved in perfect tandem with William/Wolf. Together they danced an intricate ballet of death and dismemberment.

In the periphery of her vision, Emily noticed two elderly male servants enter the room carrying large crossbows. She heard the thump of the bows being discharged and two vampires fell screaming to the floor. Emily realized that the bolts must be silver impregnated and, taking advantage of the blood suckers' agony; she chopped down at them, removing their heads with two mighty blows.

She spun again, searching for her next victim.

But the attack was over. Dismembered and decapitated bodies lay strewn around the room. Blood ran down the walls and dripped from the ceiling.

And standing in the middle of the room was the wolf that used to be William.

That still was William.

Emily dropped the sword and walked slowly up to the animal. The wolf looked back at her with William's eyes. She went right up to him and threw her arms around his neck.

The wolf pushed back at her with his head, growling softly as he did so.

Then he pulled back and started to shift. His fur receded. He shrank down to his former size. And there he stood. In front of her.

Naked.

Emily ran her gaze over him. The broad muscles of his chest, the bulging shoulders and biceps. The chiseled abs. And lower… she blushed.

William grinned, winked and left the room.

As he walked past the two servants they dropped to one knee, their heads held downwards in respect.

Emily followed him.

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Chapter 22

A single black candle guttered in the corner, the shaky orange flame seeming somehow to enhance the darkness rather than do anything to alleviate it. On a marble slab lay a naked body. Arms by its sides, hair greased back into a short ponytail. In a circle around the alter stood six elder vampires. The elite of the United Kingdom chapter of the *Nosferatu*.

Lord Byron stepped forward and approached the body.

Then with shocking savagery and a total lack of ceremony he bit into its neck. The person on the slab screamed out in agony as blood pumped from the jagged wound, flowing down his chest and arms and legs.

With a final shake of his head, Lord Byron tore a chunk of flesh from the victim and then stood back, once more a part of the circle of elders.

The body jerked spasmodically a few times, heels drumming against the marble once, twice, thrice. Then a death rattle gurgled from its ruined throat and it lay still.

Dead.

'Will he reanimate?' asked Cromwell the Enforcer. 'And if so, will he become a Grinder?'

'He will reanimate,' confirmed Lord Byron. 'I could taste his power. You see, Enforcer, he is already very old. And, strictly speaking, he is not even human. I have a feeling that he will be a great asset to our chapter and to our movement.'

'I still wonder if he can he be trusted?' questioned the Enforcer.

'Oh yes,' answered the lord. 'He is sick of playing the underdog. He yearns for the power and influence that he once had. And the lust for power is a far stronger drive than either love or hate. Believe me, he will become one of our greatest resources. Already he has shown his loyalty and dedication. And, thanks in part to him, by the end of this day we will be stronger than ever before. We shall be almost unchallenged. An unstoppable force.'

There was a scream and a howl as the dead body twitched into animation and the new aspirant stood up.

He glanced around at the circle of elders and he smiled, his fangs sliding out like two ivory daggers, his neck wound already healed into a ragged pink scar.

'Incredible,' breathed Lord Byron. 'Instead of taking hours to heal and change he literally took a matter of minutes.'

The new Aspirant walked over and knelt before the lord. 'My lord. I am your servant.'

Lord Byron Nodded. 'And it is with love and honor that I accept you into the house of Byron. Stand, Nathan Tremblay, former Shadowhunter, and take your place at my side.'

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Chapter 23

The Bentley Continental GT8 belted along at over one hundred miles an hour. It was still night time. After the vamp attack, Emily and William had cleaned themselves up. Then Emily tried to contact Ambros to tell him about the attack. But she was unable get hold of anyone. The landline to Pankhurst Manor was down and no one answered their cell phones.

William agreed with Emily that they should proceed to Pankhurst as quickly as possible.

'You lied to me,' snapped Emily.

'No,' refuted William. 'Well, perhaps, but only thorough omission. Never an outright lie. I would never do that to you. Ever.'

'So when were you going to tell me then?' insisted Em. 'At what stage of our relationship were you going to inform me that you were a werewolf?'

William smiled.'We have a relationship? Splendid.'

'Oh shut it. I'm really angry with you,' yelled Emily.

'Well what about you?' asked William. 'When were you going to tell me that you were Buffy the vampire slayer? And, by the way, I'm not a werewolf.'

'Please William. I bloody saw you turn onto a wolf the size of a trailer home.'

'Yes, granted. But I'm still not a werewolf. Technically, I'm a shape shifter.'

'Tomato – tomahtoh.'

'No. It's a very different thing,' insisted William. 'Believe me, I know quite a few werewolves. They have to change during a full moon. It's a biological imperative. And when they do, they have very little control over their animal instincts. They hunt. And that is pretty much what dominates their thoughts. They can also change at will during other phases of the moon and at those times they are more in charge of their faculties.'

'And you?' asked Emily. 'What's the big difference?'

'The change is never forced upon me, no matter what the moon is doing.

Also, I'm bigger, much bigger, faster and stronger than your common and garden werewolf, although I am still vulnerable to silver. But probably the biggest difference is that, as a shifter, I control the level of the change. If I want, I can half change or even less. Sort of an upright man/wolf hybrid. So I have the enhanced strength, speed and healing but can still walk upright and talk. After a fashion, anyway. Werewolves are pretty much an all-or-nothing state. Man or wolf.'

'I get it,' admitted Em. 'A month ago I would have freaked out big time but now, well, I won't say that being attacked by vampires and being defended by a werewolf...'

'Shape shifter,' interrupted William.

'Whatever, I won't say that it's meh...but it's in the realms of normal. So what's your excuse for denying that Vamps exist?'

'I was protecting you. How was I to know that you were a Shadowhunter?'

'True,' admitted Em. 'So you know about Shadowhunters then?'

'I'm hundreds of years old and I'm a shape shifter. Of course I know about the Olympus Foundation, in fact I have had many dealings with them in the past. Just not recently. Well, not for many years, actually.'

‘I’m only eighteen and a few weeks ago I considered that to be a young adult. Now that I’m surrounded by all of these thousand year old men I’m starting to feel like a bit of a baby.’

‘Steady. Hundreds...not thousands.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Anyway,’ continued William. ‘It doesn’t work like that. Physical age has nothing to do with how old or knowledgeable or experienced that you are. It’s a spiritual thing. As a Shadowhunter you come from a long line of selectively bred superhumans. Their memories, their experiences...they are all inside you. Just waiting to be unlocked. Your physical being is eighteen years old but your essence is many hundreds if not thousands of years old. Particularly if both of your parents are of the original line.’

‘They are,’ confirmed Emily.

‘Well then, Emily Shadowhunter Hawk. You are a very special person.’

‘Cool, Thanks. How much longer until we get to the manor? I’m seriously worried about them.’

‘Not long. But I wouldn’t worry. There’s no way that anything bad could happen to a group of Shadowhunters. I mean, it would take a full scale war to bring harm to them, a concentrated attack by sixty plus vamps, maybe more if you include the grinders. And I don’t see the brethren launching a war for no reason.’

‘Maybe they have a reason,’ says Em. ‘What?’ asked William.

‘What I already told you.’

William drew a deep breath. ‘The *corona potestatem* Is that why you mentioned it? Are they looking for it?’

‘Apparently,’ confirmed Emily. ‘I ran into a few of them a couple of days back and they brought the subject up. But why should that matter? You’ve already told me that it doesn’t exist.’

William grimaced. ‘I may have been a little light with the truth there.’

‘Oh, big surprise. Don’t tell me, you lied again. Is anything that you’ve actually told me the truth?’

‘Everything is true,’ reacted William. ‘Except for the shape shifter thing. And the vamps. Oh, and the *corona potestatem.* It does exist but that is all that I can tell you.’

‘That’s all that you know?’

William shook his head. ‘I’m not going to lie to you again, Emily. I know much more about it but I’m not at liberty to tell you. I’ve sworn a blood oath and I cannot break it.’

Emily sat back in her seat with a sigh and kept silent.

Meanwhile, William drove the massive sports saloon like it was an extension of his own body, taking impossibly narrow gaps and barreling around corners on two wheels. They got to the gates of the manor house in record time only to find them wide open.

William raced up the driveway, turning his beams off as he did.

‘Let’s not telegraph our arrival,’ he explained. ‘Just in case.’

‘Hey,’ said Emily. ‘You do know that its night time? People need light to see.’

William smiled tightly. ‘I see just as well at night.’

Em shrugged. ‘So do I, I guess, it’s just habit to want lights on.’

As they drew closer to the house William shook his head. ‘I don’t like this. Something’s wrong. No lights. And look,’ he said as he brought the car to a halt. ‘The front door has been smashed off its hinges.’

He opened the car door and then ran around to the trunk and pulled out a katana in a scabbard. He handed it to Emily. ‘This sword has been in our family for centuries. It was crafted by Japan’s greatest swordsmith, Goro Masamune, over seven hundred years ago. Its blade has been coated with silver. Now, it is yours.’

Emily accepted the sword and belted the scabbard around her waist.

William took out another item and handed it to her. 'Colt .45,' he said. 'Para-ordnance frame, so it holds fifteen rounds. Silver tipped bullets.'

Emily stuck the pistol into her belt with a nod of thanks.

William started to strip, throwing his clothes into the trunk as he did so.

'Hey, what're doing?' asked Em.

'I'm going to change,' he answered. 'No need to ruin another set of clothes, so I'll take them off first.'

'Oh, of course,' acknowledged Emily. She half looked away but not so much that she couldn't still see him. As William pulled off his boxers he glanced at her, caught her eye and winked. She blushed and straight away cursed herself for not being able to control her autonomic response, as Bastian put it.

But she continued to peek as William changed. This time he didn't go full-wolf but sort of metamorphosed into a man-wolf hybrid. At the end of the transformation he stood almost eight feet tall and the muscles on his arms, chest and legs were monstrous, liked someone had constructed him out of raw concrete. A thick layer of dark fur covered his body. And his face, although undeniably still William, developed a protruding snout, large exposed canines and pointed ears.

'Let's go,' he growled, his voice a savage blend of animal and human.

Emily followed the Wolfman up the stairs to the broken front door. Just before they went inside William held his hand/paw up. 'Wait,' he said in a soft growl. 'I smell blood. Humans and vampire. Also something else.' He sniffed the air. 'Zombies?' he questioned.

Emily nodded. 'The servants were zombies,' she affirmed.

The wolf-man shook his head. 'That's grotesque.'

'It's not what you think,' defended Emily.

'Whatever,' responded William. 'Let's proceed with caution.'

Emily followed him into the manor, drawing her sword as she did so. They moved silently, all senses alert.

They walked down the long corridor on the ground floor, William leading the way, allowing his sense of smell to guide him.

Slowly, he pushed the door of the drawing room open. Emily gasped in shock as they walked in. The carpets were soaked with blood. There were also large splashes of it on the walls and even the ceiling. Scattered around the room were three headless vamp bodies and, in the far corner, the diminutive corpse of Josephine Brady. Her katana was broken, the blade snapped in two. In her hand was a Glock 10mm pistol, the slide racked back, showing it was empty. Emily checked Josephine's pulse but it was obvious by the gaping wounds in her chest and neck, that she was dead.

They left the room and ghosted back along the corridor checking the other rooms as they did so. In the kitchen they discovered another two dead vampires, their heads had been torn from their shoulders with great force and around them lay the bodies of five of the zombie servants, their arms and legs ripped off, massive gaping holes in their torsos. But no blood. Like dismembered dolls. Broken puppets.

'Zombies are incredibly strong,' noted William. 'But slow. They managed to get a couple of the bloodsuckers though. Good on them.' He looked closely at the vampire remains. 'Grinders,' he said. 'Not true vampires. Look,' he pointed. 'Misshapen heads, slightly malformed bodies. Strong and quick but stupider than a box of horse shoes. Fanatically obedient to their masters. The Vamps use them as cannon fodder.'

Again they wandered through the charnel house of death, seeking Emily's friends. As they got close to the dining room William held up his hand.

'I can smell fresh blood in there,' he said. Emily stood behind him as he placed his massive paw on the door. Then, with a huge surge of power, he simply smashed it

off its hinges and charged into the room.

This time, the sight of seven dead vamps greeted them, four of them grinders. And, lying on the table, Karl's dead body. All about him were spent shell casings and in each hand he held a Desert Eagle pistol. His throat had been torn open and it was obvious that something had fed on him, as there were bite marks on his arms and face. 'The Grinders did that,' said William. 'They often feed on their victims. And not just blood, they eat the flesh'

He tilted his head to one side and then, without warning, he ran from the room and Emily followed.

They twisted and turned down corridors until William crashed through a set of double doors into a huge ball room. In the middle of the room stood two men.

And surrounding them were close on twenty vampires. A mix of Grinders, Adepts and Masters. The Grinders were gibbering like hyenas, jumping up and down with bloodlust and excitement, whilst the other blood suckers were hissing and howling as they attacked.

Emily saw that it was Piet and Lyle who were facing off against the pack. Both were bleeding from multiple wounds. Piet was wielding his katana and a short dagger while Lyle had a massive war hammer in his hands. On the floor were the dead and wounded bodies of at least another twelve vampires. The place was a nightmare of blood and gore. Hieronymus Bosch's version of hell.

William instantly slipped into full wolf mode, dropping to all fours and attacking, tearing into the exposed vampires' backs.

Emily drew her pistol and started firing off rounds. Her shots landed true but although they put a few vamps down, she knew that the hits wouldn't kill them. At that moment, however, she was simply happy to slow them down some.

The slide racked back. Empty. She launched herself at the vamps, drawing her katana and striking in one fluid movement Once again the room became a stage for the dance of death and destruction.

Vamps screamed, William howled his hatred and Piet and Lyle cried out in anger and physical effort.

The first Shadowhunter to go down was Lyle, as even his great strength could not keep the multitude of vampires at bay. Blood poured from a huge number of wounds and he was borne to the floor by a pile of Grinders who slashed and bit at him, ripping open his jugular and painting themselves with his blood. As they start to feed on him Piet roared and attacked, hacking them off Lyle's body.

'Get up, fat man,' he shouted. 'We're not done yet.'

But there was no answer and before Piet could turn, a Master jumped him from behind and bit down on the back of his neck. Piet fell to the floor twitching in agony as he did.

Emily and William were forced into the corner as the remaining dozen blood suckers fanned out and readied themselves to attack.

William glanced at Emily and, even though he could not talk in full wolf mode, his expression was easy to read. His devastation at not being able to protect her. His helplessness. His feelings of despair.

Emily smiled. 'Hey,' she said. 'There's only a few of them. Tell you what, I'll take the ones on the left and you take the ones on the right.'

William gave her a wolfy grin, exposing his four inch long canines.

But just before they launched themselves at the approaching blood suckers, something came crashing through the floor-to-ceiling windows that lined the one side of the ballroom.

A single man in a black cloak, spinning in the air as he leapt in.

Emily looked up. His cloak billowed about him as he landed, His long black hair hung down past his shoulders and his pale face was unshaven. His lips, full and

sensual and as red as blood. His skin as pale as an angel of the grave. With a flourish he drew his rapier and attacked.

William and Emily followed suite, hacking and tearing and carving their way through the surprised brood of vampires.

Within seconds all of the brethren lay dead. William prowled around the room, checking to make sure, using his massive jaws to tear the heads from the shoulders of anyone that he suspected might still be alive.

Then he changed back to his Wolfman mode, while Emily rushed over to check on Piet.

Meanwhile, the newcomer stood still, about fifteen feet away, his rapier by his side. Silent. Alert but not nervous.

'You,' growled William.

The newcomer bowed theatrically. 'Yes, Sir William. It is I, Sylvian Baptiste at your service.'

'You two take care of Emily. Also, I don't know where Bastian or Nathan is. Ambros was here but he disappeared.'

'What do you mean?' asked Emily. 'He ran away?'

'No,' said Piet. 'In the middle of the fight he got bitten bad and then he just disappeared. Poof. Gone.' The big man grimaced in pain. 'Oh, man,' he gasped. 'This bloody hurts. Do me a favor, Emily,' he continued. 'Do you think that you could get me something to drink? I mean alcoholic. Brandy maybe.'

'Of course,' said Emily. 'Just lie still.'

She stood up and as she was looking around the ballroom to check if there was a drinks cabinet of some sort, a shockingly loud gunshot echoed through the room. She looked back at Piet to see that he had drawn a pistol, put it to his temple and pulled the trigger.

'Oh no,' she cried out as she knelt next to him. 'Why?'

'He is a brave man,' said William. 'He didn't want to turn so he killed himself before he could. Come now, let us check the rest of the house for survivors.'

Emily shook her head. 'There is no one else,' she whispered as tears rolled down her cheeks

'What are your plans?' asked Sylvian.

Emily looked up at him for a few seconds, her mouth open but mute.

She didn't survive the change but the bite brought on labor. So, alas, I was born to a dead mother. As such, it is true that I have many traits of the vampire. I am not immortal but I do live an extended life. Like the blood suckers I cannot take daylight, so have to live at night. However, I don't have to drink human blood to survive. I eat normal foods, although I do have fangs, but I use them only for battle. Obviously I also have increased strength and speed and eyesight. So,' he ended. 'Not a vampire but almost a vampire. *Tu comprends*?'

Emily nodded.

'And so,' continued Sylvian. 'That is why I hunt the vampire. They killed my mother and they cursed me to live forever in the dark,' he spat on the floor. *'Merde!'*

'So you saving me was simply a byproduct of your hunt?' asked Emily.

Again Sylvian did the French shrug. 'Perhaps.

But still it is a happy coincidence is it not?'

'Emily,' interrupted William, still in Wolfman mode. 'We need to get out of here. Do you have anything that you need to collect?'

Emily put her hand to her pendant that Ryoko had gifted her only a few weeks and also a lifetime ago. She shook her head. 'I have everything that I need,' she said

'Clothes,' said William. Emily took a deep breath.

All that she wanted to do was leave but William was right. She needed clothes.

William nodded at Sylvian and then glanced at Lyle's body. An unspoken request

flashed between them and the Frenchman nodded and drew his rapier, knowing that Sir William wanted him to ensure that none of the dead Shadowhunters could turn. Sylvian would remove their heads when Emily was out of the room.

Then the Wolfman followed Emily to her room where she grabbed a rucksack and piled all of her black Shadowhunter outfits in. She didn't bother with her dresses as she figured that the time for frivolities was over, although she still retained enough vanity to pack her new makeup and beauty products. 'Right,' she said. 'Let's get the hell out of this slaughter house.'

The three of them ran from the house. William opened the trunk to retrieve his clothes, morphing back as he did so. After quickly pulling on his outfit he jumped into the driver's seat. Emily climbed into the back seat and Sylvian rode shotgun. The powerful engine roared and the car sped down the driveway.

'I'm going to head to London,' said William. 'That alright with you?' he questioned Sylvian.

'Oui,' confirmed the Bloodborn. 'If you are heading for your London home then you go close to Sloan Square. Please drop me there.'

'Why?' enquired William.

'It is where I dwell at the moment. In the Holy Trinity Church opposite Sloane Square. The priest there is a friend.'

'Understanding priest to allow a vampire in the house of god.'

'Up yours William,' said Sylvian. 'After a few hundred years that joke is wearing a bit thin.'

'I disagree,' chuckled William. 'Still makes me laugh.'

'Yes. But you have a very basic sense of humor. Anyway, the priest isn't human. He's a Cluracan.'

'A what?' asked Emily.

'Cluracan,' answered William. 'Sort of an Irish leprechaun. Except normal sized. Kind souls and always willing to help a lost cause. Unusual to find one working as a priest though.'

'He was cast out of the underground kingdom last century,' said Sylvian. 'Ended up in the church. Does a good job actually.'

Emily shook her head. 'Just when I think that I'm getting to grips with things, you guys spring something else on me. I mean, is anyone a normal human or are we surrounded by the occult and weirdo types?'

Both William and Sylvian laughed out loud. 'Actually,' said Sylvian. 'There are a surprising

amount of the fey folk present in human society. Wizards, werewolves, vampires, leprechauns, ghouls, banshees, demons, kobolds, jotnar. The list goes on and on.'

'What about elves and hobbits?' asked Em.

'Oh be serious,' quipped Sylvian. 'This isn't Lord of the Rings, this is real life.'

'Oh excuse me,' countered Emily and she stuck her tongue out at the bloodborn count.

'Charming,' mumbled Sylvian. 'Uh, here.' He said to William. 'Drop me off, it's close enough and I need to move. It's only twenty seven minutes to sunrise.'

'You know the exact time that the sun is going to come up?' questioned Emily.

'Of course,' answered Sylvian. 'Life and death knowledge.'

William pulled the car over to the side of the road and Sylvian got out. He turned, waved and then simply seemed to disappear as he moved so fast. William pulled off again.

'He seems nice,' noted Emily.

'He's a pompous French ass,' quipped William. 'Oh. And you?' teased Em.

'I'm entirely different,' argued William. 'I'm a pompous English ass.' He slowed down and stopped outside a massive townhouse. Then he pressed a remote control

on his visor and the automatic gate slid open in front of them.

The house was situated in Kensington Palace Gardens road, opposite the Nepalese embassy and, although Emily was unaware of the fact, if purchased in the current market it would have set the new owner back more than thirty million dollars.

William steered the car down a ramp into an underground parking and then Emily followed him up a flight of steps and into the entrance hall.

An old servant waited for them at the top of the stairs, greeting William with a nod of and a quiet, 'Sir.'

'Good evening, Halston,' answered William. 'This is Emily, she shall be staying in the blue room tonight. Wake chef and tell him to prepare a meal. Something quick and substantial. A good fry up will do nicely.'

The servant nodded again and went off to do Sir William's bidding.

'Come along,' said William. 'I'll show you to your room. You can have a quick shower, change, whatever and then ring the bell and someone will come and show you to the dining room.'

Emily did as William suggested and half an hour later they were chowing down on platters of fried eggs, bacon, sausages, baked beans, mushrooms, kidneys, black pudding and toast.

As they ate, William talked. 'We have a problem,' he stated.

'No shit, Sherlock,' responded Emily. 'All my friends are dead, well, except for Nathan and Bastian and no one knows where they are.'

'It's worse than that,' said William. 'It's obvious that the brethren are looking to completely wipe out the Olympus Foundation.

I'm not sure why they chose now to do it but I suspect that it might have something to do with the whole *corona potestatem.'*

'Well then they've pretty much done what they set out to do,' exclaimed Emily.

'Not true,' argued William. 'Three of you are left and we're not sure what happened to your wizard chap. Also, there are Olympus members all over the world. We need to find them. It's a great pity that you're so new to the whole thing, a bit more knowledge of the structure of the Foundation would be invaluable.'

'I know the passwords to get into the computer records. They're in the cloud. There must be some info there.'

'Good,' affirmed William. 'But for now we need to address the biggest problem. You.'

'Me?'

'Yes. The vamps are going to keep coming after you. They've tried twice already and, as far as they're concerned, you have single handedly defeated all comers. By now they will be convinced that you are superman and the terminator rolled onto one. The next time they come it will be in numbers that will certainly overwhelm us. Even if Sylvian is present.'

Emily frowned. 'What do we do?'

'Well, you've got to go off grid somehow. It's no good staying here. My London residence is no secret. Also, I'm sure that by tomorrow they'll have some Familiars watching me around the clock.'

'Where can I go?' asked Emily.

'I have a number of apartments that are registered in the names of certain trusts,' answered William. 'Totally untraceable back to me. I'll give you the keys to one of them. Can you ride a motorcycle?'

Emily nodded. 'Sure.'

'Right. I've got a Harley Davidson V-Rod you can have. It's also registered to an offshore trust. Better than a car, faster in traffic. Also, you'll need some more ammunition for the Glock, maybe a couple more firearms.'

Emily shook her head. 'I don't want to go.'

William took her hand and kissed it. ‘You sort of have to,’ he said softly. ‘You’ve got a target painted on you and you’ve got a bunch of blood suckers looking to fire at it. Staying with me will only make things worse. Look, I’m also going to give you a handful of burner phones. I’ll pre- program the corresponding numbers into each one. You can phone me whenever you need to and then destroy the phone afterwards. Come on, let’s get you kitted.’

It took William less than an hour to sort Emily out. She had her clothes, half a dozen throw away cell phones, one hundred rounds of ammunition with three extra magazines for the Glock, her katana, a sawn off double barrel shotgun with a pistol grip, short enough to conceal under her jacket.

Extra ammo for the same. A selection of throwing knives and a thick wad of cash in various denominations adding up to twenty thousand Pounds Sterling. And her makeup.

The Harley was a beauty. Matt black with a larger gas tank for extended mileage and a satnav. William punched the address of the apartment into the satnav and handed Emily the keys.

There was no need to postpone the inevitable.

They stared at each other. Emily desperately wanted to kiss him. To hold him tight and run her hands down his chest and over his taut abs and more. But she knew that, if she did, she wouldn’t have the strength to leave. As it was she felt like she was tearing her own heart out.

So instead she simply donned her helmet, started the Harley and rode out.

And into the next phase of her life.

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Chapter 24

It had been two weeks since the Pyrrhic victory over the Olympus Foundation. Lord Byron could still feel the pain of his dying brethren. Of course not the Grinders. They were mere animated meat bombs. Weapons of violence to unleash and use up. But, apart from the thirty or so Grinders, the true death had been brought upon fifteen brethren. And of those, three were Elders. In one night, the United Kingdom Chapter had lost over five thousand years of collective experience.

An insufferable loss.

But at the same time they had gained something unique. Something that no one had ever encountered before. They had turned a Shadowhunter.

Standing before him was the result. And it was magnificent.

Nathan Tremblay stood, legs slightly apart, his shirtless torso showing off an almost impossibly ripped musculature. His stance was relaxed and in his right hand he held a sword. On his face, there was a slight smile.

No, thought Byron to himself. Not a smile. A sneer. Of contempt.

Four other vampires surrounded him. All armed with similar swords, circling, looking for an advantage. Looking for the correct moment to strike.

Before any vampire was accepted into the ranks of Cromwell's Enforcers, they were made to stand a trial of combat. It was no mere formality. The Aspirant had to show skill, courage and the desire to win.

Obviously there was no way that a single combatant could stand against four experienced Enforcers but that was not the point. The point of the exercise was to see how long they lasted.

And, if Cromwell was impressed enough, the Aspirant was allowed to join their ranks.

One of the Enforcers lunged forward but Nathan slipped out of the way without any apparent effort. As he did so, another struck from behind. Again Nathan moved but the edge of the blade slid along his ribs, cutting deeply. Exposing bone.

Cromwell smiled, pleased to see the sneering Aspirant brought down a peg or two. However, his smile did not last long when he saw the deep cut heal up almost instantly. In less than a second.

Cromwell turned to Byron.

'My lord,' he whispered. 'How is that possible? A wound that deep should take minutes to heal. Not microseconds.'

Lord Byron raised an eyebrow. 'I do not know, Enforcer. All that I do know is that we have something unique. The blend of Shadowhunter and *Nosferatu* has created a new breed. Now watch.'

Again the vampires attacked but this time Nathan struck back. Spinning and cutting and parrying, combining his new speed and strength with his hundred years of Shadowhunter training. He was unstoppable. His blade struck and cut again and again. Whenever an enforcer was badly cut they would simply drop to one knee and stay still. After all, it was not a fight to the death. It was a simple test.

Within seconds the four Enforcers were kneeling and Nathan stood still. His only wound already totally healed.

Lord Byron clapped. 'Well done, young Aspirant,' he said. 'Now, please go to your

rooms and await Master Cromwell's decision.

Nathan nodded, bowed respectfully and left the room without a glance at the defeated Enforcers.

'Beyond impressive,' commented Cromwell. 'But I still wonder if he can be trusted'

Lord Byron laughed. 'He is *Nosferatu*. His blood is our blood. Of course he can be trusted. That is like asking if we can trust ourselves.'

'Normally I would agree, sire,' said Cromwell. 'But you yourself said that we are dealing with a new species here. Who knows how and what he thinks.'

'He betrayed his Shadowhunter companions. He helped to destroy the Olympus Foundation,' reminded Byron. 'He is desperate to be accepted. Also, he is ambitious. Very ambitious. I would watch him if I were you, Cromwell,' advised Lord Byron with a grin.

'And I you, my lord,' added the Enforcer. 'However, sire, we have not totally destroyed the foundation. When we took Nathan to see the manor house, he said that one of the Hunters was not present. A Jamaican by the name of Bastian Miller. Also we could find no trace of the wizard.'

'They are of no moment,' said Byron. 'What worries me is the girl. This Emily Hawk. The crew that we sent to exterminate her did not return. I have placed watchers over Sir William's abode and there is no sign of her. Or him. I feel that, once again, we have underestimated her power.'

'It seems impossible,' mused Cromwell. 'We sent ten brethren after her. She must be beyond superhuman. Unless Sir William helped in some way.'

Lord Byron laughed. 'What? That effete antiques dealer? I think not. Must have been quite a shock for him though. No, we need to hunt this Emily down and destroy her. Our time has come. This is the time of the *Nosferatu* and I won't have some snot-nose little girl child ruining things.'

'We have all of our Familiars looking out for her, sire,' affirmed Cromwell. 'We shall find her; it is only a matter of time.'

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Chapter 25

The apartment was situated in the docks of London. A large warehouse conversion that took up the top two floors of the building. Three hundred and sixty degree views and wrap around balconies allowed one to observe London and surrounds in its entirety.

There were three bedrooms, all on-suite, three reception rooms and an indoor-outdoor gymnasium on the roof terrace.

Emily's days were much of a muchness. She rose early, ate, then trained for three hours. After that, she ate again, showered and went out if she needed anything.

Then returned and trained again, until exhaustion set in.

There were times when she longed to contact Bart and Ryoko but she knew that to do so would surely sign their death warrant. She couldn't take the smallest chance of attracting attention to them. The *Nosferatu* would hone in on them and destroy them merely because they meant something to her.

She had phoned William a couple of times but the conversations were stilted and wary as his concern for her overwhelmed all else and, after the second call, Emily had decided not to contact him again until she was either in trouble or she had some sort of plan.

When she first arrived she had gone out and purchased some nondescript clothing. Cheap jeans, t-shirts, sneakers and a baseball cap. She knew that parading about in her black Shadowhunter gear could attract unwanted attention, so instead she donned the attire of a student. With her long blonde hair tucked under the cap, no makeup and small round sunglasses she blended in with any of the other thousands of comparable types walking the street of the capital city. Anonymous in their similarities.

When she shopped for food she used cash and purchased from the local market as opposed to the chain stores. She never shopped in the same place more than once a week and never purchased anything unusual. Polite, quiet and forgettable.

She was alone. But she had no time to be lonely. Her need to improve herself drove her beyond loneliness.

Over the last few weeks she had spent hours upon hours in the apartments gym, practicing with her sword, beating the heavy punchbag, kicking and striking the *makiwara* Japanese punching board and performing endless katas that had honed her skills to a level that she had never thought possible. She was fitter, stronger, faster and more deadly than she had ever been.

Because she was determined that the next time she came across a blood sucker, there would only be one possible outcome. They had killed her friends. They had irrevocably changed her life. And they would pay.

It was time for Emily Hawk to kick some serious ass.

It had been a month to the day when she finally donned her Shadowhunter uniform and left the building heading for the city. There she visited a shabby lawyer's office in Brixton, handed them a wad of cash and instructed them to place a series of classified adverts in all of the London and national newspapers. There was no way that she could have done so herself without a credit card and the consequent questions and flags that its use would have raised.

The ad was short and simple but she knew that only one person would fully understand what she was saying.

Bastian. Tings a gwaan but we hab di ting lack. Link me a Ben Johnson day where we got de bashy red dress.

Loosely translated from the Jamaican patois the message read; “Bastian. Things have gone bad but we need to sort them out. Meet me on Thursday at the shop where I purchased the red dress.”

It was the best that she could do. Now she simply had to wait two days and then stake out the clothes shop that she and Bastian had visited before.

She had no idea how to track down Nathan.

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Chapter 26

The ancient crone absentmindedly stroked the large crow that sat on the back of the kitchen chair while she looked at the body of the man on the floor.

'Ah, Ambros,' she croaked. 'What have you done this time?'

The body had appeared in the old crone's cottage some few weeks back. Materializing out of thin air to land on the floor in her living area. She had recognized him straight away, even though it had been over a hundred years since she had last seen him. She had also instantly perceived that he was dying. In fact, so close to death was he, that she could literally smell the stench of the River Styx on his clothes.

A closer look at his various wounds and her worst fears were realized. *Droch-fhola.* The evil blood. Vampires.

Given time a mage as powerful as the man who lay before her could survive. But he needed time. And that he did not have. So the old crone had cast a spell. It was done in desperation but it was all that she could think of.

The spell of *Gheimhridh*. The winter spell.

And now the body of Ambros lay still, under a two inch coating of ice. His heart in stasis. Not alive but not yet dead.

She had given him time. But it had cost her dearly, for although the spell of *Gheimhridh* allowed one to live on borrowed time, it demanded payment in kind.

So she had sacrificed years of her own life. And even to one who has lived for so long as to be almost immortal, time is a precious resource and not one to be given away lightly. But she would have gladly sacrificed her every last second for the not dead/not alive man in front of her. For, although she was now known to all as the Morrigan, or the goddess of battle, she remembered well the days when she had been called Morgan le Fay. Then she had been the oft time lover of the man in front of her. Myrddin Ambrosius Ambros Caledonensis, or Merlin the Magician as most knew him.

Since then, the legend of King Arthur and his mage had been twisted and turned into a mere fable of Camelot and the eventual search for the Holy Grail. But the Morrigan remembered the truth. She remembered the battles and the sacrifices that Arthur's knights had made as they fought against the *Nosferatu*. The children of the night.

The terror of the villagers as they became mere fodder for the vampires and how, with the help of Merlin and the Olympus Foundation, they had eventually driven the *Nosferatu* underground so that, once more, the people of Camelot could live in happiness and light.

Since those far flung times, myth and fable had turned the Olympus Foundation into the Knights of the Round Table and Merlin had become known as a mere magician.

But the Morrigan knew – and so she sacrificed her own time for that of Merlin's.

Because his sageness and wisdom would be needed once again when the dark ones came to the fore.

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Chapter 27

Emily had arrived early, perhaps ten minutes before the boutique opened, and she had sat in the window seat of the coffee shop across the street. She nursed two coffees for just over an hour and then left and took a similar seat in a vegetarian snack bar adjacent to the shop that she was scoping out.

A yoghurt and a carrot juice later she noticed a short, sturdy Jamaican man walk past the boutique, his dreads ensconced in an oversized black beanie with a Rasta stripe. This was the second time that she had seen him so she decided to get up and follow. Leaving handful of change on the table, she walked out.

The Rastaman walked slowly but steadily, never looking back or to the side, his eyes straight ahead and his pace measured. After ten minutes he took a left turn. Then another, before he stopped in front of a matt black door recessed into the front of what looked to be a nightclub. The windows painted black and the exterior, a dark shade of midnight blue.

There was no neon signage or overt advertisements but, using her enhanced eyesight, Emily could make out a discreet brass plaque next to the door.

Club Haile Selassie – Members Only.

The man pushed a button next to the door and waited. It swung open to reveal a dark corridor and, before he went inside, the Rasta turned to Emily and motioned to her.

She hesitated slightly and then ran across the street and allowed herself to be ushered through the door which was closed behind her.

'How you know about Ben Johnson day?' asked a voice in the darkness.

Emily smiled. 'I remember things,' she replied. 'You know that.' She threw her arms around the lithe Jamaican Shadowhunter who was standing in the gloom. 'You're alive,' she said.

'You too,' laughed Bastian as he stood back from her. 'You looking good, girl.' He punched her upper arm. 'Man, rock solid. You been hitting the gym?'

Em nodded, her expression serious. 'I'm not the little girl that you knew a month ago.'

Bastian's face darkened. 'Yeah,' he said. 'Some bad stuff be going down.'

He turned and walked down the corridor, beckoning for Em to follow. They walked into a large wood paneled room, a fireplace on the one wall, large windows that looked out onto an enclosed courtyard. Em noticed with amusement that the courtyard had multiple pots growing marijuana plants in them.

There was a long table in the centre of the room and on it was an impressive array of firearms. Semi auto pistols, massive revolvers, mac-10 submachine guns and even an AK47 assault rifle. Piles of ammunition lay scattered casually across the surface and Em could see, by the way the light reflected off the bullets, that the ammo was all silver tipped.

There were six men sitting in the room and all but one stood up when Emily entered.

'These are my peeps,' said Bastian. He introduced them to Em, pointing to each as he called out their names. 'Tagereg, Stakkie, Qwenga, Banton and Samfy.' He pointed at the man who remained seated. 'That be Don Dada, the big boss of the

place. He don't stand so good on account of been crippled.'

Don Dada looked the spit of BB King and he laughed out loud.

'Now, Bastian boy, I told you I don't be liking that word, "cripple". I be challenged in the working limbs department, that's all. So don't be introducing me as no cripple, boy.'

'Ah, feel no way, Dada,' replied Bastian. 'I say what I say with love and respect.'

Emily smiled. 'Pleased to meet you mister Dada.'

Don Dada grinned back, showing a row of perfect white teeth and a sizable quantity of gold caps. 'Me no mister to you, lil-girl,' he said. 'You just call me Dada and we gets along fine.'

Em nodded. 'Unusual names you all got,' she noted. 'I'm Emily. Bastian calls me Em so I suppose that you all will as well.'

The man who went by the moniker of Stakkie nodded. 'Those ain't be our real names,' he explained. 'They be our street names.'

'Yeah,' confirmed Bastian. 'Stakkie is slang for Mental Case. Tagereg means Criminal. Qwenga is Gangster. Banton is Storyteller and Samfy, Con Man.'

Apart from Bastian and Stakkie who had shown them in, the other four men were all six foot five or six. Tall, well muscled and rangy with a palpable well of aggression and arrogance that Emily found both dangerous and attractive.

She could tell straight away that these were men that were quick to smile and easy to anger. A heady combination and one that would keep anyone on their toes.

'Anyways,' said Bastian. 'Sit. We've called out for pizza and soda. Now we need to catch up.'

They all sat down but before Em spoke she cast a guarded look at Bastian. He nodded to her. 'The boys know all,' he said. 'They may be Yardies that treat the law a little looser than most but they hate the blood suckers for real. You ask any island boy and he'll tell you that he ain't got no truck with monsters or zombies or voodoo.'

'That be correct,' confirmed Dada. 'We sees that crap and we take it out,' he pat the AK47 assault rifle on the table. 'We got the tools and we got the skills. Those vamps must learn that the night time streets belong to the Yardies, not the leeches.'

There was a chorus of rumbling agreement from the collected men.

So Em told them her story.

After she had finished Bastian let out a slow, low whistle. 'Man, you have had a freaky few weeks,' he said. 'Bloodborn, shapeshifters. Going on the run and hiding. I see that you're wearing your Shadowhunter outfit now.'

Em nodded. 'That's because I'm not hiding anymore. I'm hunting.'

The Yardies shouted their approval. 'Cool,' said Bastian. 'So what's the plan?'

Em shrugged. 'Haven't got one. I thought that I'd leave that bit up to you, seeing as you're about a million years old and I'm barely a teenager.'

'Steady,' said Bastian.

Tagareg laughed. 'Dat be true,' he said. 'Grandpa Bastian be make us all like little pickney boys he be so old.'

Bastian shook his head. 'Hey Tagareg, go easy on the patois, right? I mean you went to Oxford University and got a first in English.'

Tagareg shrugged. 'So? I speak how I speak.' 'Well speak normal,' said Bastian. 'At least until Emily learns the lingo. But we need to make a plan. One thing, the vamps must be hurting big time right now. The Shadowhunters and your boys, Sir William and Sylvian, have iced over seventy of them, so I can guarantee that you'll all be top of the most hated list right now.'

Em shook her head. 'Not William or Sylvian,' she stated. 'The vamps have no idea that William's a shifter and as far as they're concerned, Sylvian doesn't even exist.'

'Whoa,' interjected Tagareg. 'So what you're saying is that the vamps reckon that

you are pretty much wholly responsible for taking out a huge percentage of their standing force. Man,' he continued. 'I wouldn't give long odds on your survival. They're gonna come after you with everything that they got, girl.'

'Shut it, Tag,' warned Bastian. 'I won't have any of that negative talk here, okay?'

'You want me to shut it, why don't you make me,' growled Tag as he stood up, topping out at almost a foot taller than Bastian.

The Shadowhunter raised an eyebrow. 'Really? You want to go there again? Ain't you sick of me beating your ass to a pulp every time that you try this crap?'

Tag shrugged. 'Maybe this time I get lucky. Whatever, I'm not accustomed to backing down, so face up, man. Let's go round and round and see what happens.'

Emily stood up, walked over to Tag and, without warning, she punched him in the chest. The big man took off like he'd been hit by a monster truck, flying across the room and smashing into the wall so hard that chunks of plaster chipped off. Then he slid down the wall and collapsed onto the floor in an untidy heap, his limbs twitching as he lapsed into unconsciousness.

'Look here,' said Emily. 'We don't have time for any of this macho bullshit. Out there are hundreds of blood suckers. They killed our friends. They're looking for us and they aren't going to stop there. If they find the *corona potestatem* who knows what they'll do next. This isn't just about us. It's about the whole of humanity.'

The Yardies stared at the young Shadowhunter and finally Dada spoke. 'Hey,' he said. 'That child jus whipped Tag's ass big time. I reckon dat we make a plan before she get physical wid the rest of us.'

Bastian grinned. 'You speak the truth, Don Dada.

Best we get our thinking caps on or Em is gonna tear our arms off and beat us to death with the sticky ends.'

Em stuck her tongue out at Bastian and then sat down. 'Okay,' she said. 'Let's make a plan. I reckon that we should get hold of William and Sylvian. See how they can help.'

There was an uncomfortable silence until Don Dada spoke. 'We don't want hang with no monsters,' he said. 'Damn vampire and werewolf.'

'He's a bloodborn,' countered Em. 'And William is a shapeshifter.'

'Sure,' said Dada. 'But if it looks like a tiger and acts like a tiger then I learned long ago that you better not pull its tail, or the damn thing will chew your head off. Listen, girly, I don't mind my people helps to hunt down the dark ones but don't ask me to team up wid de monsters. We Yardies fight the good fight but we does it alone.'

There was a groan from the corner and Tag pulled himself slowly to his feet. He shook his head and looked around the room. 'Man,' he grunted. 'I just been smashed by a little girl sized truck. Damn, babe, where'd you learn to punch like that?'

'I'm not your babe, Tagareg,' snapped Emily. 'Now are you going to behave?'

'If I don't are you gonna beat up on me some more?'

Em nodded. 'For sure.'

Okay,' answered Tag. 'Then I'll behave. But I'm still going to have to agree with the boss man.

We don't work with no monsters. Period.'

'Well then have you got any better suggestions?' asked Em.

'Sure. It's simple. We get our street merchants to keep an eye out for vamp-whores. Then we follow them to the suck-fest and kill their masters.'

'Not sure that I understood that completely,' admitted Em.

'It's a good idea,' interjected Bastian. 'What Tag is saying is that we get our merchants, the dudes that sell our ganga on the streets, to keep an eye out for familiars. Young guys and girls that are looking to hang out with the vamps. As soon as we get a line on them, we follow them back to their master's hang out and when

the vamps are feeding we attack and kill them.'

'You can do that?' asked Em.

'Sure,' affirmed Tag. 'We got hundreds of salesmen. And there be many Goths and Vamp- lovers out there. We just keep a track on all of them and pretty soon one of them will lead us to a nest. Bish, bash, bosh – we go and machine gun the leeches to death. Then we just keep doing that. Wash, rinse, repeat.'

'I like it,' said Em. 'It's simple.'

'Yeah,' laughed Bastian. 'Like Tagareg.'

Tag didn't laugh. 'Yeah, Bastian,' he said. 'You just been all cheeky 'cause you know that the little girl will tear Tag a new asshole if he beats on you.'

Bastian laughed louder and Tag had the decency to join in.

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Chapter 28

Kevin no longer went by his given name. Ever since he and three friends had started the *real vampire website.com* they had taken on more suitable monikers. He had decided on Tarquin. Simon had become Constantine. Brian changed his name to Cyprian and Debbie, the only girl in the group, was now known as Cordelia.

They had written up a list of thirteen rules that applied to anyone who wanted to be a member of their house and, although no one had yet applied, Kevin/Tarquin insisted that all of the rules would be stringently adhered to.

Cyprian had complained, saying that most of the rules were either lame or were simply a differently worded repetition of the first three rules. But Tarquin had explained that any list to do with the arcane had to have thirteen points. I mean, like, it's not as though vampires work on the decimal system, you know. He had told them. No self respecting *Nosferatu* would ever make a list of ten points. Or even twelve, I mean, really, what are they? Like bakers or something?

And anyway, most of the points were to do with how to dress. All of the members were in agreement that the most important thing about being a vampire fledgling, is the uber-cool dress sense. Firstly, black, black and more black. Secondly, piercings were cool, tattoos were cooler and it was imperative to wear loads of chunky jewelry featuring inverted crucifixes, the number 666 and Victorian looking amulets.

The four of them frequented a number of the better known Goth clubs and vampire hangouts in London. Places like "The Blood and Velvet" in Holloway Road or the "Being Boiled" in Notting Hill Gate.

But this was the first time that they had visited a lesser known club, situated off a cramped side street in Kings Cross. The club was known as "The Clinic", and the moment that Tarquin and his friends had entered he knew that it was the real deal.

They had been checked in at the door, as entrance was by invitation only. Tarquin had garnered an invite the weekend before when a cool looking dude, dressed all in black with the palest skin imaginable, had approached him at the "Blood and Velvet" and asked if he would like to try a new club. He had assured Tarquin that this was the proper business. No role playing or pretending. Real vampires, real blood. Proper *Nosferatu*. And he had flattered Tarquin enormously, calling all the other Goths, Wanabees, Pretenders and Posers. Tarquin had accepted with alacrity and the dude had told him that he was welcome to bring some friends, as long as they were of a similar caliber.

And so here they were. All four of them had been seriously nervous before coming, knowing that this could be their break into the big time. The real McCoy, as it were. So Cyprian had contacted their usual dealer and purchased a couple of ounces of weed off him. He had told the Rasta about the club, boasting that they were now part of an elite, as opposed to the children that were merely playing at being familiars. And the Jamaican dealer had seemed impressed, asking many questions and then wishing Cyprian good luck.

They had smoked themselves into a more mellow state of mind and then left for the club, arriving relaxed and comfortable.

The place was large and well appointed. A bar ran the length of the one wall and a selection of low tables and wingback chairs were scattered about the room. Along the other wall, a row of curtained private booths stood in semi-darkness.

The music was a combination of jazz fusion and funk. No throbbing house beats or sticky modern pop. And the volume was low enough to enable one to have a decent conversation without shouting raucously into their ear.

The group of teenagers went to the bar and ordered vodka, straight up. They would have preferred something sweeter, an alchopop or a 'something-and-coke' but vodka was cool. And being cool was what it was all about.

No sooner had they received their drinks than a stunning young man came walking over to greet them.

'Hi,' he said with a smile, his fangs glinting slightly in the low light. 'It's good to see newcomers at the club. My name is Patrick.'

Tarquin introduced himself and the rest of the group. Patrick raised an eyebrow. 'Tarquin? Cordelia? Oh, how deliciously Victorian' he said. 'Tell me, is this your first time at a real *Nosferatu* club?'

They all nodded, while at the same time trying to look cool and self assured.

'And have you ever communed with one of us before?'

They shook their heads.

'But we are keen to serve,' assured Cordelia, desperate to garner the vampire's approbation.

'Ah, virgins,' breathed Patrick with another fang revealing smile. 'Well don't be nervous,' he assured. 'Tell you what, why don't you join me and a couple of my friends in one of the private booths. We can talk and...' he paused for a second. 'Drink.'

The four friends followed Patrick to one of the curtained booths that lined the wall. He pulled the curtain aside to reveal a surprisingly large area. A central table and two long couches. More than ample room for the four friends, plus Patrick and the two more vampires already sitting there.

The other vamps looked like a couple, a man similar in appearance to Patrick and a blonde woman with short cropped hair and a face straight out of Vogue magazine.

Patrick introduced the four newcomers and the female vampire chuckled, low and throaty. 'Gosh,' she said. 'Surely those aren't you real names? Good god, where did you find them? Old Addams family movies?' She stood up and held out her hand. 'My name is Morticia and this here is Gomez.' All three vamps laughed. 'Not really,' the blonde continued. 'I'm Sally. This gentleman here is Toby.'

Tarquin took Sally's hand and, as he did, she pulled him towards her, lifting his feet off the ground with her strength.

He slammed up against Sally's body with an audible thump that took his breath away.

She sniffed his neck. 'Mmm. Yummy,' she purred as her fangs slid out over her bottom lip.

'They're virgins,' informed Patrick as he motioned the other three friends to sit down on the sofas. Tarquin stayed standing, held upright by Sally's iron grip.

'So you kids want to get into the vampire scene? asked Toby.

They nodded collectively, like a crew of bobble heads on a car dashboard.

'Why?' enquired Patrick.

'Well it's just so, like uber-cool,' answered Cordelia. 'You all look so good and then there's that everlasting life thing.'

'And the sick clothes,' added Cyprian.

'I see,' noted Toby. 'So, tell me before we become really good friends. What are your real names?'

Cyprian looked embarrassed but Toby assured him. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'A name is nothing and we wouldn't want to start our relationship off with a lie, would we?'

'I'm Brian,' admitted the ex-Cyprian. 'That's Simon, Debbie and Tarquin is actually Kevin.'

‘See now, that wasn’t so difficult, was it?’

Brian smiled and nodded. ‘So now we’re friends?’ he asked hesitantly.

Patrick laughed in genuine amusement. ‘Oh please,’ he said as he leaned forward and grasped Brian by the throat.

‘You’re nothing more than meat. And why would we possibly want to fraternize with the food?’

Brian thrashed about but Patrick’s grip was stronger than steel. At the same time Sally bared her fangs and savagely bit into Kevin’s neck, throwing her head from side to side as she tore deeply into his jugular. Blood poured out, running over her lips and down her chest.

Debbie started to scream but it died in her throat as Toby jumped across the table and bit into her.

Simon turned to run but as he did, Toby grabbed his arm and bit his wrist. In desperation Simon pulled away and ripped the curtain aside. And then a massive explosion rocked the room. He saw a group of men running in through the broken door that had been blown off its hinges. They were all wielding automatic weapons.

Leading them was a tall blonde angel with a Japanese sword.

The room erupted in pandemonium as vampires attacked the interlopers, familiars ran screaming for cover and the angel strode forward, swinging her sword like the very vision of the goddess of death herself. All about her, blood suckers were flung aside as she causally decapitated them, her sword weaving a gossamer pattern of light in the fetid atmosphere.

One of the men turned towards Simon who dropped to the floor as the man opened up with his automatic weapon.

Slugs buffeted the air above the teenager and he could hear them slamming into the vampires behind him.

And then she was there, stepping over him, her sword a flash of red and silver. He felt the warm vampire blood spray over his back as she dealt her cards of death once more.

Simon peered up to see another man with a sword. He was moving around the room, decapitating any vampire who was on the floor. The angel stepped back over him and looked down.

She held out her hand. ‘Get up.’

Simon took it and stood, his legs shaking with the aftermath of his absolute terror.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘Your friends are dead.’ Simon turned to see that she had decapitated

Kevin, Debbie and Brian. Without warning he felt the bile rise in his throat and he bent over double as he threw up.

Tag walked over. ‘Yo, Em, why’s the boy chucking up?’ he asked.

She gestured towards the pile of mutilated bodies. ‘His friends.’

He shook his head. ‘Well, when you ride the tiger you don’t ever get off, cause that’s when he eats you. Serves them right for fraternizing with the monsters.’

‘Come on Tagareg,’ said Emily. ‘He’s young and stupid. Give him a break.’

Tag nodded. ‘Okay. Hey, boy,’ he said to Simon. ‘You all right?’

Simon nodded and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Tagareg jumped back. ‘Oh crap, man,’ ne exclaimed. ‘The boy’s been bit.’ He pointed at Simon’s wrist, the teeth marks blatantly apparent. ‘He’s gonna have to go, Em. And quick, before he turns.’

Simon turned to the blonde angel for support. ‘Please,’ he whispered. ‘It’s just a small bite. I’m sure that it’ll be fine.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. And Simon could see that she genuinely was.

The last thing that he saw was the silver arc of the sword descending on his neck.

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Chapter 29

Bastian had moved into the apartment with Em. At the same time, so had Tagareg who had taken to following Emily around like a six foot six, three hundred pound puppy. He had appointed himself as her bodyguard and he took his new vocation deadly seriously, insisting that everyone treated Em with respect...or else.

It was the morning after their first hit on the vampire club and Emily was still hugely upset over killing the boy, Simon. She didn't say anything but both Bastian and Tag could tell that the extermination had cost her dearly.

Bastian sat down at the kitchen table opposite Em, shook a cigarette out of his pack, lit and inhaled. 'It was a mercy killing,' he said softly. 'He would have died anyway. Or turned. Or worse, he could have become a Grinder. A mindless animal, living forever under the yoke of the blood suckers.'

'He was just a kid,' whispered Em. 'Looking to fit in. Playing games. Damn, he didn't deserve to die.' Tag brought over a mug of tea and handed it to her. She smiled. 'Thanks Tag. You're a good man.'

Tag shook his head. 'No. If I'd killed that kid it wouldn't have bothered me none. Things like that upset good folk. Me, it's just a task, nothing more. You want more sugar in that?'

Em shook her head and forced some of the over-sweetened tea down. For some reason Tag thought that the more sugar he put into a cup of tea, the nicer it was. Initially Em had told him that she liked her tea without milk and just a dash of honey, but he had laughed out loud, convinced that she was teasing him.

'Yeah,' he had said. 'Imagine drinking something like that. You don't worry, girly,' he had continued. 'Tag makes a decent cup of tea.'

And he had proceeded to bring her a mug of milky, tea-flavored syrup.

And Emily simply didn't have the heart to correct him. So now she drank milky, sweet tea.

'Look, Em,' said Bastian. 'It's bad killing an innocent. But the moment you fraternize with the blood suckers, you lose your innocence. It's going to happen again and you have to harden your soul. Put it behind you. These are the tough decisions that we're going to have to make. Over and over again.'

'Yeah,' added Tag. 'If they don't wanna be dead then they better not play with the monsters.'

'I'll be fine,' promised Em. 'Especially after a mug of Tag's excellent tea.'

Tag beamed so widely that it looked as though he was going to swallow both of his ears.

'We need to discuss our modus operandi,' said Bastian. 'Last night worked but it was messy and noisy. I had to pull in a lot of favors and spend a lot of money to cover things up. Luckily I've still got access to the Foundation's funds so money is no object but we simply cannot carry on just machine gunning Vampire nests. Sooner or later the coppers are going to come down hard and we don't want that.'

'But that's always been our way,' argued Tag. 'We hit our enemies hard and fast and messy. Send out a message. Don't mess with the boys from back-of-the-yard.'

'Well that's going to stop,' said Bastian. 'This isn't some petty gang war. It's about the continuation of the human species.

So from now on we go in quieter. I'll organize some silencers for the MAC-10 sub machine guns and also for the Glock pistols. We're going to have to lose the AK's and the shotguns. Stealth is going to be our watchword from now on.'

'I still think that we should involve William and Sylvian,' suggested Em. 'And we need to find Nathan.'

Bastian shook his head. 'Not gonna happen. Firstly, if Nathan is hiding, we will never find him until he wants to be found. And, secondly, regarding your mates, maybe if it was just me it would be a go, but the Yardies don't work with monsters.'

'They're not monsters,' argued Emily. 'William's real nice and Sylvian has saved my life twice.'

'To us they all monsters,' said Tagareg. 'Vamps, werewolves, zombies, shapeshifters. They're things that you scare children with to make them behave. Monsters. Don't matter if they good or if they bad, they all non-human so they be monsters to us.'

'What about Bastian and me?' asked Em. 'Shadowhunters. Aren't we non-human monsters?'

Tag laughed. 'No ways, girly,' he said. 'You dudes is enhanced humans. You all good with us.'

***

Three days later Em and her Yardies hit a vampire lounge in a basement in Islington.

And this time it was a very different operation. They came in through the back entrance. No explosions. Samfy had picked the lock after disabling the single security camera with a slingshot.

The back room was a small store full of liquor and that led to a kitchen. The kitchen, however, was empty. Unused.

The Yardies slipped through, Tag on point with Emily right behind him. Then they burst into the club, weapons hot.

It was a single large room. Dim lights as per usual. Curved sofas and low tables were scattered randomly about the room and small groups of vamps were feeding, three or four to each human. Unlike the other times that Em had seen them take suck, these vamps were actually being quite tender. Nibbling and licking at their victim's blood as opposed to tearing and rending their flesh.

For some reason Em found it worse than the usual bloody mayhem that the blood suckers called feeding. It was more intimate. Sexual.

The vamps were taken by complete surprise. Silenced weapons spat silver death. Em and Bastian whirled like steel bladed dervishes, cutting through the blood suckers and their bitten-victims.

Not one being survived. All vamps were dispatched. And every victim, as they had all been infected.

Emily's blade ran red with the blood of both monster and human alike.

They left via the same way that they had entered. Stealthy. Silent. But for the almost imperceptible sound of Emily's quiet weeping.

As they had after the last hit, the group split up. The Yardies heading back to their hangout and Em, Bastian and Tag heading for the apartment.

The three friends arrived back on foot. Tag entered first, flicking on the main lights when he did. As the lights went on someone, or something, grabbed the six foot six, three hundred pound Yardie and threw him across the room like he was a puppet. He hammered into the kitchen table and rolled off, breaking two chairs as he smashed into them on his way down.

He made to stand up but another man stood above him, a drawn rapier held at his throat. 'I think not, *mon ami*,' he said. 'Unless you want me to spill your lifeblood out onto the floor.'

Sylvian smiled and slid his sword back into his scabbard.

Bastian readied himself to fight but before he could attack, Emily shouted out.

'Stop. They're friends.' She turned to face William. 'What the hell do you think that you're doing, throwing Tag around like that?'

William didn't back down as he usually did. 'How was I to know that he was on your side? How was I to know that these two hadn't forced you to bring them back here? In fact, Emily, how was I supposed to know anything as you haven't bloody phoned me for weeks now? Sylvian and I thought that you were in trouble. And then I hear, via the grapevine, that you've launched an all out war on the *Nosferatu*. Without even telling me.'

'You're not my keeper,' yelled Emily. 'And someone has to fight the fight. Because I don't see you doing it.'

'No,' agreed William. 'But it would have been common courtesy to keep me in the loop. I have managed to stay under the wire for a few hundred years and now, thanks to you, every Familiar and informer is watching me trying to figure out where I fit into this whole scenario. And you know what? It's only a matter of time until someone works out what I am. And let me tell you something for nothing, miss, self-righteous, fight-the-good-fight, bloody Hawk. The only thing that vampires hate more than Shadowhunters, are werewolves.'

'You're not a werewolf,' argued Emily.

'That's bloody semantics, Emily. And you know it.' William clenched his fists in front of himself as he tried to control his anger.

Tagareg, thinking that William was about to strike Emily, leapt up and ran towards her. But before the big Jamaican got moving,

Sylvian casually back-handed him across his chest, not even bothering to close his fist.

Once again the massive Yardie flew across the room, smashed into the wall and crumpled to an unconscious heap on the floor.

Bastian threw up his hands. 'Alright, everyone just calm down. Sir William, you remember me?'

William nodded. 'Chief inspector, I think it was.'

Bastian shrugged. 'Obviously not. I'm a Shadowhunter. One of the last few left in the United Kingdom at the moment. Anyway, I think that we should all take a breath, brew up some tea and have a civilized chat. Okay?'

Both Sylvian and William nodded.

In the corner of the room, Tag shook his head and mumbled. 'Tea? I can do that. Might as well, it seems that I ain't no bodyguard any more. Even the little Frenchman beat the crap out of me with a single bitch-slap.'

Emily went over and helped the big man to his feet. 'Rubbish, she said. 'It was a sucker punch and you weren't expecting it. I'll make the tea. You relax, get your strength back, you're still my bodyguard and I need you sharp.'

Tag grinned. 'Yeah, cool. That's right.' He pointed at Sylvian. 'Next time, brother, I be waiting for you. Then we gonna set to. No more sucker- punching Tag.'

Sylvian nodded. 'Next time, mister Yardie man.'

Tag, Bastian and William sat at the kitchen table and Emily put on the kettle.

But before Emily could brew up the tea, Tag did a spectacular double take as the conversation caught up with him. 'Whoa,' he exclaimed. 'Time out.' He jumped to his feet. 'Just before the little French dude smacked me across the room, did I hear you say that you was a werewolf?' he accused William.

William nodded. 'Technically I'm a shapeshifter, but, yes.'

'Oh no,' continued Tag. 'Then that would make this dude the vampire that Em was talking about.'

'Bloodborn,' said Sylvian with a sigh. 'Not vampire.'

‘Crap,’ yelled Tag. ‘I don’t hang with no monsters.’

‘Stop it, Tag,’ commanded Emily. ‘That’s enough. They’re friends of mine and you will be polite to them. They are not werewolves and vampires. In fact the two of them have probably killed more monsters, as you put it, than every Yardie that ever existed.’

Tag raised an eyebrow. ‘That true?’ he asked Sylvian.

The bloodborn nodded. ‘Thousands. But then I have been hunting down blood suckers for many hundreds of years now, so I do have a slight advantage over you.’

Tag thought for a few seconds and then nodded. ‘I suppose if you be killing monsters then you can’t be one yourself.’

Both Sylvian and William nodded.

‘Also, being...umm...supernatural or whatever,’ continued Tag. ‘That would make you mega-strong.’

Again they nodded.

‘Cool,’ finished Tag. ‘That means that, technically, I’m still a bad ass. It’s just that I’m a human bad-ass. Can’t really compete with the X-men or whatever.’

Emily put down the mugs of tea on the table and then shoveled another four spoons of sugar into Tag’s. ‘That’s right, Tag,’ she confirmed. ‘You’re still the baddest. Human, that is.’

Tag smiled, sipped his tea, paused and then added another three spoons of sugar, his fragile ego repaired.

‘Look, Emily,’ said William. ‘I’m concerned. You’ve got to stop this gung-ho plan of attack. It’s juvenile. Clumsy.’

‘I know what I’m doing,’ argued Em.

William shook his head. ‘No,’ he disagreed. ‘You don’t. You only think that you know what you’re doing. Sylvian and I have been fighting these abominations for many generations now. You simply cannot underestimate them. They don’t think in the same terms that we do. Well, that you do. Short term doesn’t exist to them. They are patient beyond belief. They think in years as opposed to days. Centuries. Eons. I beg you, pull back for a while. Stop, think.’

Em shook her head. ‘They killed my friends. They are a threat to human existence. Perhaps your age has brought with it an unnecessary caution,’ she suggested. ‘Maybe your immortality has blinded you to the worth of human life. The preciousness of every hour that a normal mortal has. If I stop and think, people die. Every moment of thoughtful contemplation will result in more human deaths. No, William,’ she insisted. ‘Humans are dying so I have to react in a human time frame. Trust me, we are bad-ass. We hit hard and fast, the vamps don’t stand a chance.’

William reached across and took Emily’s hand. ‘Sylvian and I will come with you,’ he said. ‘Extra protection.’

Em shook her head. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘The Yardies won’t accept you. Don Dada will go mental. It’s the whole, monster thing. Anyway, I’ve got Bastian and Tag. I’ll be fine. Trust me.’

Sylvian stood up. ‘Well, that’s it,’ he said. ‘Our work is done. Some lessons have to be learned on a personal basis. Because, let’s face it, it is hard, if not impossible to know more than an eighteen year old girl.’

Without another word the Frenchman strode from the room and out of the front door. William stood and followed him.

Just before he got out of the front door Emily caught up with him, grabbed his face and kissed him soundly. ‘Thank you for caring,’ she breathed. ‘But this is something that I have to do. It’s what I am. A Shadowhunter.’

William kissed her back, pressing his lean body up against her. She could feel his heartbeat thumping in his chest. Feel his need for her. His want. His concern. And it took all of her strength to keep herself from grabbing him by the arm and dragging

him through to her bedroom to finally have some serious alone-time together.

It was William who pulled away first. He raised an eyebrow and then flashed her a grin. ‘Be safe.’

Then he left.

Behind her Emily heard Tag say to Bastian. ‘That’s enough tea for the girly, I think that what she needs now is a bucket of cold water instead.’

And Emily couldn’t have put it better herself.

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Chapter 30

The club was situated in Camden Town. Past the canal lock and down an almost invisible side street, there was a single story warehouse. The windows were filthy and the doors scarred and unpainted. But if one looked closely it became obvious that the dilapidation was a mere facade. A Hollywood set. Post Apocalyptic chic, the scars by design and the filth applied by hand.

A simple but effective camouflage for a private club situated in the beating heart of an area that boasted a thriving nightlife.

Emily and her Yardies had cased the joint the day before and found a side room that was full of boxes and old furniture. They had decided to enter through this room, via the large set of windows. Samfy had disabled the alarm wires that were linked to the windows and then cut out one of the panes. After that it was a simple process to raise the latch, open the window and climb in.

Once in the room the team did a quick weapons check.

'Right, boys,' said Em. 'Let's go do some harm to the dark ones.'

She opened the door into the warehouse and they filed out into the corridor. At the end of the short corridor was another door. Again, Emily eased it open and peered around. It led directly into the club. A huge single room that had been divided up into smaller areas using shoulder high screens. Almost like a miniature maze. Various types of tables, chairs and sofas were laid out in the maze and a bar ran the whole length of the opposite wall. A multitude of mirror balls reflected snowflakes of light about the room and red spots wove back and forth like pinpoints of fire.

The music was an eastern influenced jazz, using sliding syncopations and based on the Arabic Freygish scale. Like a snake charmer with a drum set. It set Emily's teeth on edge, the notes jarring against her western sensibilities.

Em wasn't tall enough to see directly over the maze of partitions so Tagareg, at six foot six, cast his eyes over the set up.

'Seems almost empty,' he whispered into her ear. 'Maybe ten people scattered around. They all sitting singularly. None in groups. With this weird lighting and the sparkle of the mirror balls, I can't make out if they're vampires or not.'

'This isn't right,' commented Stakkie. 'My informant told me that this place would be buzzing. He reckons that it gets well full of bloodsuckers every Thursday night. Sometimes a hundred or more.'

'I don't like this,' said Emily.

'No worries,' commented Tag. 'I'll just go grab one of these dudes and ask him where all the vampires at.'

'Wait,' said Em. But it was too late. With Tag, thought and deed happened almost simultaneously. He strode into the maze, approached the first person and pulled him to his feet, studying him closely as he held his MAC-10 submachine gun ready in case he was attacked.

'They're all humans,' he called back over his shoulder. 'And they're either well drunk or drugged.' He shook the man a couple of times and then dropped him. He crumpled to the floor like he was asleep. Tag shrugged and turned to walk back.

But as he did so his face registered shock and, without warning, he opened up

with his submachine gun, the silenced rounds tearing out at a rate of eight per second.

A body that seemed to have literally materialized in front of him was picked up by the stream of silver-tipped lead and thrown backwards, shrieking in agony.

'Vamps,' shouted Tag. 'Everywhere. They're lying down, hiding in the shadows below the partitions.'

As he shouted his warning, black clad vampires seemed to boil out of the ground. Ten, twenty, thirty. Countless.

The Yardies opened up, with long raking bursts of fire. Blood spayed into the air as the bullets struck flesh. Bastian and Emily charged forward, their swords weaving a destructive pattern in the air, cutting and slicing.

Em heard a shout of pain and saw Stakkie go down. A vamp latched on to him as he was reloading. Then another, and another. They tore at his flesh, opening his throat and spilling his life out onto the carpet.

With three mighty blows, Emily dispatched them. Stakkie looked up at her with pain filled eyes.

'Do it,' he croaked from his ruined throat. 'Do it, girly before I turn.'

Emily choked back her tears as she slashed downwards, bringing an end to Stakkie's life.

But there was no time to pause. No time for regret. No time for human feelings.

She jumped forward, parried a dagger wielded by a human familiar and then slashed upwards, disemboweling him with one stroke. He fell to the floor, his intestines rolling out of his wound like so much offal.

Tagareg had picked up Stakkie's machine gun and now wielded one in each hand, firing in short controlled bursts. 'Damn,' he shouted. 'They got us good. Ambushed us. Crap, we should have seen this coming.'

He moved forward, firing and kicking as he did so. Em watched his back, cutting down any vamps that got close to him.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Qwenga go down under a pile of blood suckers. And then Samfy. But both of them got back to their feet, firing their weapons, driving back their attackers, genuine smiles plastered across their faces.

'Yeah, you don't get me that easy,' shouted Qwenga. He looked across at Emily. 'No bites,' he called. 'I's clean.' He reloaded his MAC 10 and carried on killing.

'And I,' added Samfy.

But there were simply too many of them. And every vamp took an incredible amount of damage before they were neutralized.

Finally, Emily, Bastian and the remaining Yardies were forced into a circle, no longer attacking. Simply defending.

Fighting for their lives.

'I'm almost out of ammo,' yelled Tag. 'Me too,' shouted Stakkie.

There was a chorus of agreement from the other Yardies who were all burning through ammunition at a horrendous rate, shiny brass cartridge cases spewing from their weapons and covering the floor like discarded costume jewelry.

Man, thought Emily to herself. It just can't get any worse than this.

And then the ceiling imploded.

Roof tiles buzzed through the air like shrapnel, exploding against the walls or smashing into exposed flesh. Whole sheets of corrugated iron spun across the room like giant blades, severing limbs of human and vampire alike. Large wooden beams crashed to the floor, crushing and maiming.

And then something came leaping down from out of the explosion and landed in the center of the room, legs astride, carrying the biggest machine gun that Emily had ever seen.

A Garwood electrically driven Gatling gun. The type normally mounted on a

helicopter. Its barrels revolved as it spat out silver coated lead slugs at a rate of just over 3200 a minute. That is fifty four bullets a second. It sounded like a giant, tearing telephone books in half with one long continuous growl. The noise was beyond belief.

Vampires simply exploded as the massive quantities of ordnance tore them to shreds.

The Yardies threw themselves to the floor, as did Bastian and Emily.

Em looked up from her prone position to see that it was none other than William/Wolfman standing in the middle of the room. Incongruously her mind took in the scene and immediately started to work out how much his ordnance actually weighed.

The Gatling gun came in at ninety five pounds, three thousand rounds of ammunition at a further three hundred pounds and the two car batteries needed to drive the motor, another hundred and twenty. A total of five hundred and fifteen pounds. And he was wielding it like an assault rifle.

The fact that he had transformed into his Wolfman mode probably had something to do with it, as he stood over eight foot tall and his muscles bulged out like sacks of leather filled with nests of fighting snakes as they swelled and rippled.

And then the ammunition was expended and the only sound was the whirr of the barrels as they spun round.

That stopped as well. Silence.

William threw back his head and howled. The sound reverberated about the room, shivering the already fragile foundations and shaking bits of masonry and wood loose, filling the room with dust and debris.

‘Now that,’ said Tag. ‘Is the most seriously kick-ass thing that I have ever seen.’

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Chapter 31

William/Wolfman led Emily and her Yardies out via the back entrance and they followed without question. Tag picked up Stakkie's body, carrying it with as much respect as possible as he brought up the rear.

The back door was locked but William, still in beast mode, simply brushed it aside like it was a paper wall hanging.

In the alley was a large, Ford transit, or what Emily referred to as a van. Sylvian stood at the rear and around him, lying on the floor, were the remains of at least five decapitated vampires.

'Come on,' he shouted. '*Vite, vite*. Quickly. Get in the back before more come.'

They all piled into the back of the van while Sylvian got behind the wheel. William threw the Gatling gun and accessories in after them and then clambered onto the passenger seat, changing back to his human form as he did so. He grabbed a pair of track pants and a t-shirt out of the glove box and pulled them on before turning to address everyone. 'Is everyone alright?' he asked. 'Have any of you been bitten?'

'We be fine,' answered Tag. 'But Stakkie is well broken. His head isn't here.'

'What do you mean? What happened to it?' asked William.

'I think that Emily chopped it off,' answered Tag.

'He asked me to,' objected Emily. 'He didn't want to turn.'

'Hey,' reassured Tag. 'Ain't none of us blame you, sweet-thing. You did the good and brave thing. I was just answering the Wolfman.'

'Dude, we gotta go back for Stakkie's head,' said Samfy.

'Ain't no way, man,' countered Tag. 'We can bury him without his head. It's still him. Well, most of him anyway.'

Emily curled up and leaned against the door, closing her eyes and fighting back tears. It was her fault. She had pushed too hard and too fast and led her boys straight into an ambush.

If it hadn't been for William there was no doubt that they would have been killed. Or far worse. Turned. She shuddered. The thought of becoming a vampire filled her with such dread that she almost threw up. Her stomach cramped and she could feel a trickle of cold sweat run down her back.

And then without warning she burst into floods of tears. Her body shook with emotion and she couldn't catch her breath. She felt as though her lungs were about to burst. Black shadows flickered across her vision and she could hear her heartbeat thumping in her chest.

The vehicle shifted, rocking slightly on its springs and then she felt William sit down next to her. Her put his arms around her and pulled her tight, enveloping her with his arms and chest. Comforting her. Protecting her.

Once again she was surprised at the massive amount of heat that his body generated and she snuggled as close as she could, letting the warmth cocoon her.

Within seconds exhaustion overcame her and she fell into a deep sleep.

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Emily woke to find herself being carried like a small child. She didn't need to open

her eyes to know that she was in William's arms.

Not only could she feel his heat but she could smell him. That unique, clean leather and ozone musk that enveloped her like a summer's morning in an Alaskan spring. Steel and Pine trees and freshly cut grass.

'You're awake,' he said.

'Mmm,' mumbled Emily. Not yet prepared to face the world in any way whatsoever. Not even to communicate.

'You've been asleep for almost three hours.'

'Where are we?' she asked.

'The New Forest. The Yardies are back with their boss, except for Tag who wouldn't leave you. Don't think that he fully trusts Sylvian or me. And of course Bastian is with us. I thought that we needed to get out of London. Re-plan and re-strategize.'

William pushed a door open as he spoke and Emily finally opened her eyes. She saw that it was still dark outside, then William nudged the door closed. They were in a large, low ceilinged building. Stone walls, exposed beams that were black with age and a rough stone floor.

William placed her back onto her feet. 'This place has been in my family for many generations,' he said. 'It's a hunting lodge. But it's registered as crown property so no one knows that I actually own it. We're safe here from any attacks or prying eyes. The locals are all loyal to me. No one will get close to this place without me knowing about it.'

'Where are the others?' asked Em.

'It's getting dangerously close to sunrise,' answered William. 'So Sylvian is down in the cellar. Bastian is in the kitchen with Tag. They're stoking up the coal stove. Bastian's going to cook and Tag said that he'll make us a pot of tea.'

Emily grimaced at the thought of Tag's tea, but said nothing as she followed William through the house and into the kitchen.

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Chapter 32

Lord Byron stood still and studied his own feelings with a detachment borne of hundreds of years of self inspection. And he was shocked when he finally worked out what the strange emotion was.

Fear.

Not a fear of any physical harm, although that was a distinct possibility. No, this was a fear of failure. A fear of losing seven hundred years of planning and maneuvering that had brought him to the pinnacle of leadership as the Grand Master of the United Kingdom House of the *Nosferatu*.

But even he had to admit that he had not covered himself in glory over the past few weeks.

Failure had been piled on top of failure as he had not managed to completely wipe out the Olympus Foundation, letting the wizard, the girl and another Shadowhunter escape. He had blundered once again when he had tried, unsuccessfully, to exterminate the girl the second time.

Then he had not foreseen her teaming up with the London Yardies who had proceeded to exact a terrible toll on his brethren, bringing the true death to scores of them as they attacked two of his clubs.

Then when he had finally caught up with them, he had instructed Cromwell to lay a trap and it had all gone horribly wrong. Once again he had failed to see what had been in front of him the whole time. Sir William was a shapeshifter.

And not just any shapeshifter. No, according to the few vampires that had escaped his wrath at the Camden Club ambush, he was the fabled Omega Wolf, the one wolf who controlled all others. The Alpha of all Alphas. Bigger, faster and stronger than a normal werewolf. Capable of assuming a man/wolf hybrid mode.

Personally, Lord Byron did not believe them, the myth of the Great Wolf had been bandied about for centuries but he, for one, had never seen him. However, there was no denying that Sir William was most definitely a creature of great power.

Whatever his beliefs, the unthinkable had happened. Janus Augusta, the head of the Italian house and also the *Capo di tutt'i capi* of the Federation had travelled once again from Italy to England in order to personally take over the running of the purge against Emily and the Olympus Foundation. Such were Lord Byron's losses that the *Capo* had actually brought in reinforcements.

One hundred big hitters, all of them Masters, plus another one hundred Grinders. He had also brought one hundred Familiars so that they had people who could operate in the day to search for Sir William, the Yardies and the Hawk girl.

It probably wasn't actually necessary for the *Capo* to bring over such a large number of reinforcements but he had done so to prove a point. It was a public slap in the face for Lord Byron. Basically the *Capo* was saying, '*Not only do I have to sort out your problems, but I have to even bring my own people to do so*.'

Never in his hundreds of years of command had Lord Chelsea Byron been so publically shamed. So openly belittled.

The only thing now that the *Capo* could do to further his humiliation was to demote him. And although that was almost unprecedented, it had been done before.

That was what was fuelling the fires of Lord Byron's fear. The loss of his position.

His power. And with it, his existence.

Because, if he was demoted, then he knew that the *Capo di tutt'i capi* would insist on the true death. No one wanted an ex-grand Master moping about the chapter like some sort of whipped cur, begging for scraps and souring the atmosphere.

Whatever was about to happen, Lord Byron was sure that his humiliation was not yet over. His blunders had been huge, as would be his chastisement.

The door opened behind him and the *Capo* and his entourage entered, led by Cromwell the Enforcer.

The first thing that Lord Byron noticed was that none of Cromwell's own Enforcers were with him. Of the twenty six people that entered the room, Cromwell and Nathan were the only brethren belonging to the United Kingdom chapter. The rest were all from the Italian house.

The *Capo* seated himself on one of the leather wingbacks, steepled his fingers together and stared at Byron, his obscenely long fingernails almost tangling together as they curled around each other. Lord Byron approached the leader of all leaders and prostrated himself flat on the floor in front of him. For he knew that now was not the time for false pride. Now was the time to debase himself as much as possible. To humble himself before his lord and master.

No one spoke for fully five minutes. A seeming eternity.

Finally. 'I am disappointed,' rasped the *Capo*. 'I was here only a few weeks ago and you assured me that you had everything under control. The girl was as good as dead, you told me. You guaranteed it. Now I return because, instead of killing the girl, you have killed almost fifty of my children. Not counting the slovenly waste of who knows how many Grinders and countless Familiars.'

Lord Byron said nothing. Nor did he move. He simply lay flat on the floor, arms outstretched in front of him, and waited for his fate.

'Stand,' instructed the leader.

Byron rose slowly to his feet but kept his head down.

'I blame myself,' said the *Capo*.

Byron shook his head. 'No, my lord,' he said. 'It is my fault entirely. You are incapable of making a mistake.'

The *Capo* waved one of his ancient claws in front of his face in dismissal. 'Pish and nonsense,' he said. 'I make many mistakes. But tell me now, Byron,' he continued. 'This new creature that you have created,' he pointed at Nathan. 'Talk to me about it.'

'He is an ex-Shadowhunter, my liege. I turned him only a short while ago but his growth has been exemplary. The combination of his Shadowhunter genes and the *Nosferatu* has gifted him with unusual strength and capabilities.'

The *Capo* beckoned to Nathan. 'Come here, my child,' he commanded.

Nathan walked over and knelt before the ancient vampire leader who leaned forward and took his face in his hands, turning it from side to side as he inspected him. Then the *Capo* pulled Nathan towards himself and slowly and deliberately licked his neck, his purple tongue rasping across his jugular. He pursed his lips, tasting. Rolling the flavor around in his mouth like a wine connoisseur.

The he leaned back into his chair again. Nathan stayed on his knees, his head down.

'Tell me, Lord Byron,' continued the *Capo*. 'Who did you entrust with this latest botched ambush attempt that your house made?'

'As always I assigned the task to Cromwell the Enforcer. But the failure is mine alone.'

'I shall decide who has failed and who has not,' snapped the *Capo*. 'Or, as in this case, who has failed me the most.' He closed his eyes for a while and sat as still as the dead. Lord Byron started to suspect that he had actually fallen asleep or had

gone into some sort of deep fugue state. Then he suddenly spoke aloud, his voice a whip-crack of command.

'Child,' he addressed Nathan. 'Kill the Enforcer.'

Nathan reacted instantaneously, jumping to his feet and attacking Cromwell in one fluid movement. Cromwell, however, also reacted instantly.

The two beings clashed in a welter of kicks and punches, the movements so fast as to be completely indistinguishable to the mortal eye.

Within mere seconds, hundreds of blows had been thrown and both Cromwell and Nathan were bleeding from numerous cuts. Nathan's wounds, however, healed almost as soon as they appeared, whereas Cromwell's took a little longer to knit together.

The *Capo* smiled in pleasure. 'Look,' he said to no one in particular. 'The child's healing process is phenomenal.'

As the fight progressed it became obvious that Nathan was by far the superior warrior. Cromwell had grown complacent as the decades had passed, surviving on his reputation more than his actual physical prowess. Whereas Nathan had trained every day as a Shadowhunter. And he had trained specifically to kill vampires, something that even an Enforcer did not specialize in.

In fact, after a few more seconds of hyper-speed combat it became apparent that Nathan was actually toying with the Enforcer. Holding back in order to prolong his humiliation.

The *Capo* cackled with genuine amusement when he realized what the ex-Shadowhunter was doing.

'Enough,' he said as he chuckled. 'Games are over. Finish him, my child.'

And Nathan casually grabbed Cromwell by the throat and tore out his jugular. Then, with a quick twist, he plucked his head off, walked over to the master of masters and presented him with it.

The ancient vampire took the head from the ex-Shadowhunter and held the jagged stump of the neck to his mouth, sucking on it like a gourmand trying to remove the marrow from a soup bone. When he had removed any last traces of blood he threw the detached head to the floor and then reached forward to stroke Nathan's hair.

'Good, my child,' he crooned. 'Lord Byron,' he continued. 'Discipline has been carried out. That is not to say that you are blameless but for now, I forgive you.'

Byron sank to his knees once again. 'I thank you, my master.'

'Now, this Nathan. He is your new chief Enforcer. Tell your brethren. When the child speaks, he speaks with my voice. He is now a *Caporegime*.'

Lord Byron nodded and, somehow, managed to keep his look of shock and disbelief off his face. To be considered a *Caporegime* to the master of masters was a privilege that few ever experienced.

Even Lord Byron himself had never been honored in such a way. A *Caporegime* was almost a member of the master's family.

He was to be trusted and obeyed above all others except for the Grand Master of his house.

Ostensibly, it made Nathan Tremblay the second most powerful Nosferatu in the United Kingdom. And he was only days old. A child.

Swallowing his pride, Lord Byron stood and bowed to Nathan. 'Well done, young *Nosferatu*,' he said. 'This is a high honor indeed.'

'Yes,' added the *Capo*. 'Now rise, my child, and sit here by my side for a while.' The old vampire waved the others away. 'Leave me now. I have things to discuss with the child. Go. Go and return only when I call.'

And his ancient red eyes stared at Nathan with a look of lust that he was unable to control.

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Chapter 33

The Morrigan ran her fingers along the ice that coated Merlin's arm. He was still in a deep state of hibernation but she could see that he was healing himself. The prodigious well of magic that he stored in his very soul was slowly conquering the vampire virus that caused the human physiognomy to change into that of the undead.

But it would be many moons until one would actually be able to class the master magician as truly 'alive'.

However, the goddess of battle was concerned. She could feel in her bones that war was coming. A great war.

Not like many of the ones that she remembered from recent years, more like the wars of old. During the times of King Arthur and his Shadowhunters. A battle of light against dark. And she knew that this battle would be epic. Perhaps beyond the limited recourses of the humans that would be arrayed against it. She needed Merlin to be whole once again. His knowledge and power would be an absolute necessity in the upcoming months and years.

Using her magiks she cast a scrying spell, searching out any and all that had come in contact with Merlin over the few weeks before he had transported himself to her domain. And what she saw shocked her even further.

She saw that the Olympus Foundation had all but been destroyed. From what she could reveal, only a young girl and two men remained of what was once mankind's main defense against the darkness. She also saw Sir William Wolfman and Duc Sylvian Bloodborn. This lifted her spirits slightly as both of these creatures were well known to her and their presence bode well.

Then the Morrigan delved deeper, sending her essence out to follow the vampires that had almost killed the magician. Although she could not pin down where exactly they were, she could see a misty simulacrum of their existence.

There were many of them. She concentrated further. Hundreds of Masters, many hundred more Adepts and literally thousands of Grinders. Never before had she sensed such a gathering of the *Nosferatu*.

Then she allowed her senses to wander, seeking out more knowledge. And, like metal to a lodestone she saw him. And despite his wizened and horrific appearance, Morgan knew him instantly.

Janus Augusta.

He was sitting alone in a chair, his eyes closed. As still as the grave. Then his eyes opened and he looked up and chuckled.

'Morgan la Fay,' he whispered. 'How long has it been? Five hundred years? More?'

'Janus,' gasped the Morrigan. 'I thought that you died after the Battle of Camllan.'

'Oh no,' he denied. 'It is not that easy to kill me. Quite the contrary. I have prospered and am now the head of the Italian house of the *Nosferatu* and also the *Capo di tutt'i capi* of the Federation.'

'You were always evil incarnate,' sneered Morgan. 'But the next time that we meet in person I shall make sure that there is no mistake. You will suffer the true death.'

Janus laughed. 'I do not think so. In fact, it will not be long now and I will finally have the *corona potestatem* in my possession.

Quake with fear, little godling, for your time grows close to the end. It is our time now. So run along, crow. There is nothing for you here.'

Knowing that she would garner no more information, Morgan retreated back to her own body, her heart hammering in her chest from the shock of what she had just heard.

And so it was with great deliberation that she cast aside all current mores and traditions and decided to approach The Council herself. This was unusual in many ways, mainly because Merlin was the only accepted point of liaison between the gods and humanity and that had been the way for many hundreds of years. Also, as a minor god herself, it would be considered most crass for her to show overt support for humanity. So much so that it might even lead to a shunning or brief ostracization. And that would be brief in immortal terms. Perhaps centuries, if not eons.

But she had no choice.

Once again, the woman known as both the Morrigan and Morgan la Fey, stepped outside where she assumed the form of a large crow and took off, beating her wings hard as she headed for the Castro of Altamira, the enormous underground realm ruled over by the Sidhe, or the fey-folk as they were sometimes known. The gods and goddesses of the humans and the keepers of all things magik.

As she flew, the magic began to ripple along her wings.

Blue pulses of pure power, driving her faster and faster until the air was sundered aside. Then with the sound of thunder, the crow that was the Morrigan shattered the sound barrier.

And then she was there. Flying high in the azure skies above the emerald green rolling lands of the Castro of Altamira.

Below her, various different abodes were scattered about the land. Everything from small mud huts to massive looming edifices of marble and bronze. Each dwelling was fashioned after the god or godling that lived in it.

The Formaorian gods of water lived in rude mud huts, whereas king Finvarra and his queen, Aine, lived in a palace of granite and gold. But the Morrigan knew that the exteriors of the dwellings meant naught as they were merely the projection of the general legend that surrounded the dweller. The interiors of the abode had nothing to do with the exterior. Not even their size correlated to the exterior footprint. Every dwelling was palatial when one went inside it. Gods were far too truculent and self absorbed to live in anything else but total luxury.

The Morrigan, as one of the gods of battle, was unusual in that she had chosen a self-impose exile on earth, surviving on peasant fare and living in a humble hovel. She had decided to eke out her existence in poverty, fading from human memory and avoiding the capriciousness of the gods.

But now Merlin was back and her ire had been peaked. Once again humanity needed the gods and the Morrigan was damned if she would stand by and let darkness overtake all. She had fought the good fight before and she would again.

She headed straight for the palace of granite and gold, knowing that where the king and queen were, there were oft many other gods, playing games of court, carousing and generally amusing themselves.

She landed in the main throne room, flaring her wings and changing back into human form as her feet touched the floor. But not the haggard old lady that she was on earth. That simply wouldn't do in the land of the sidhe, who valued beauty and power above all else. In this land she assumed the form of Morgan la Fay, the siren who was possessed of such beauty that she was able to tempt the celibate magician, Merlin Ambros Caledonensis Aurelius Ambrosius, to her bed chamber. The same Morgan la Fay who seduced Lancelot, driving him wild with desire for her. The seductress, enchantress, sorceress and temptress.

And so she stood in the center of the royal court. Her knee-length lustrous black hair swirling about her naked body like it had a life of its own. Hiding, revealing and tempting, as it exposed and then covered her naked flesh. The ultimate dance of the veils.

'Morgan!' The king's voice thundered across the room. 'You come uninvited, yet when I call you avoid me.'

Morgan bowed deeply, allowing her hair to part and expose her full breasts, knowing well that they would distract the king. 'My liege,' she said. 'I apologize, I was unavoidably detained.'

'For three hundred years?' he questioned. 'Has it been that long, my king?'

'Yes it has, Morgan la Fay,' he responded. 'And well you know it.'

'Clothe yourself, battle goddess,' snapped queen Aine, her jealousy etched into her face.

'I am sorry,' returned Morgan. 'It has been a while since I was last at court and had no idea that we now adhered to the same proletarian morals as the humans.' Morgan clicked her fingers and she was instantly clothed in a silk dress that clung so tightly to her womanly curves that it seemed that she was now even more naked than before.

'What do you want, Morgan?' asked the king.

'Might I not be here simply to visit?' responded Morgan.

Finvarra shook his head. 'No, you want something Morgan la Fay,' he said. 'You use, you interfere, you take. That is your way. So, out with it.'

Morgan went down on one knee. 'I ask only for a moment of your time, my king.'

'Fine. Talk, I shall give you a moment.'

'The *Dearg Due* are on the rise once more, my liege. And the Shadowhunters are no longer strong enough to resist them. Of late, the Vampires have all but destroyed the Olympus Foundation. Not only that, I have discovered that Janus Augusta is still alive and is now the grand master of the *Nosferatu* Federation.'

The king raised an eyebrow. 'That is disturbing news,' he admitted. 'But I fail to see why you consider it so disastrous.'

'I have communicated with the foul creature,' continued Morgan. 'And he informed me that he is on the very brink of possessing the *corona potestatem.* If he became a Daywalker there will be no containing his power. It will be the end of humanity as we know it. Please, my liege, I beg you. Rally the gods so that we may visit destruction on these foul creatures. Let us once and for all bring an end to them. Scour them from the face of the earth that humanity may live in peace.'

Finvarra threw his head back and laughed out loud. 'Listen to yourself, goddess of battle. So that the humans may live in peace.' He stood up and pointed at Morgan. 'Tell me, Morgan la Fay, when have the humans ever lived in peace?'

'There was a time,' answered Morgan. 'However brief it was, it did exist.'

A shadow of pain flickered over king Finvarra's face and he cast his eyes down.

'Don't let it be forgot,' he whispered, almost to himself. 'That once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment, that was known as Camelot.'

'So you do remember,' said Morgan.

'Of course I remember, Morrigan, goddess of battle,' answered Finvarra. 'I also remember that you were not blameless in the downfall of Camelot. In the death of Arthur. Mankind's last hope for everlasting peace.'

'I was not blameless,' admitted Morgan. 'But neither was I fully to blame. We all gave up. At least I have contrived to live amongst them, to try, in my small way to make up for what I did. But if we let the vampires win then humanity is surely doomed.'

'Humanity dooms itself, Morgan,' stated the king. 'They do not need the dark ones to help them. They destroy their own habitat. Their oceans are choked with the

trash of a throwaway society. They war upon each other with weapons that even the most rabid animal would not use. The poor starve at the expense of the rich. With or without the rise of the *Nosferatu*, they are damned.'

'But we can help them,' insisted Morgan.

King Finvarra shook his head sadly. 'No, Morgan la Fay, we cannot. We no longer have the power. Our time has passed. When the humans stopped worshiping us and, instead lay themselves at the feet of the Christian god. Or the Prophet Mohamed. Or even the new gods of technology and greed. Let it go, goddess. Let it go. Now leave, you are not welcome in my home.'

The Morrigan stood tall and looked about the room, trying to catch one of the gods' eyes but they all turned away.

'Not one of you?' she asked. 'You will forsake humanity now, after all these thousands of years?' A single tear slipped down her cheek. 'Not one?'

And so, in the silence of rejection, the Morrigan assumed the guise of the crow once more and transported herself back to the world of the humans.

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Chapter 34

‘It ain’t right,’ said Banton. ‘I mean, Stakkie was an otherwise SOB but every man deserves to be buried with his head.’

‘My boy,’ said Don Dada. ‘We had no choice. You guys left his head at the club. What else could we do?’

Banton shrugged. ‘Nothing. I’m just saying, it ain’t right.’

‘Rest easy, Banton,’ continued Don Dada. ‘Come the day of judgment we will all meet on Mount Zion. Praise be to Selassie.’

‘Praise him,’ agreed Banton.

Don Dada wheeled his chair over to the central table that was, as usual, covered with various firearms and ammunition. ‘So when do you reckon Emily get hold of us again?’ he asked the room in general.

Qwenga shrugged. ‘Not sure Dada,’ he admitted. ‘That Wolfman that saved our asses done took her away. He seemed mighty pissed at the time, so I reckon that she give us a call when he calms down.’

A loud beep sounded from the corner of the room and all eyes swiveled to the CCTV screens that were installed there. Samfy walked over to take a closer look. ‘There’s nothing here,’ he said. ‘Don’t know why the alarms went off.’ He carried on peering for a while, then picked up the remote control, rewound the DVD and pushed play.

As they all watched they saw a brief blur of movement that lasted for the merest fraction of a second.

‘Blood suckers,’ shouted Dada.

Everyone ran to the table and grabbed a firearm. As they did so, the window leading from the courtyard exploded inwards and a group of vampires swept into the room. At the same time the front door was ripped off its hinges and the sound of running feet echoed down the entrance corridor as more blood suckers invaded the building.

The deafening chatter of semi-auto weapons being fired in an enclosed space echoed about the building as the Yardies opened up with everything that they had.

But resistance was pointless. There were only four Yardies and the vampires kept pouring into the room. This time they had ensured that there would only be one possible outcome.

Qwenga went first, bitten multiple times. Then Banton and finally Samfy. Don Dada sat alone, his wheelchair pulled up next to the table, his pistol empty.

As the gunfire came to an end, Dada pulled a carved wooden box from a satchel attached to his wheelchair and held it to his chest.

A vampire swaggered up to the boss man. ‘So, cripple,’ he said. ‘This is how it ends.’

Dada kept quiet and merely stared back. ‘Nothing to say?’ continued the vampire. ‘Can’t walk and can’t talk. How sad.’

There was a general ripple of cruel laughter from the other vampires. The room was full of them. Perhaps fifteen in all.

‘Everything has to end,’ said Dada, eventually. ‘We cannot live forever.’ He clumsily shifted the box in his grip, trying to hide it next to his body.

‘Actually,’ contradicted the lead vamp. ‘We can. And now it is merely a matter of time before your boys turn and then, perhaps they will also be gifted with immortality. Or perhaps not. Maybe they’ll become mere Grinders. Mindless servants. You, on the other hand,’ he continued. ‘Will have to die. I mean, who wants a crippled vampire?’

Again the laughter flowed.

‘So what do you have in that box. Old man?’ asked the vamp.

‘Nothing,’ answered Dada. ‘It’s personal. Please, it’s only keepsakes. Mementoes. An old man’s memories.’

‘Give it to me.’

Don Dada shook his head.

‘Don’t be ridiculous, old man,’ said the vamp. ‘Give it to me or I shall tear your arms off and take it anyway.’

Dada looked at the vampire with hatred in his eyes and then he slowly opened the box and fumbled inside. ‘Here,’ he said as he held out his right hand.

The vampire leaned forward to look. The head Yardie was holding a small handful of wire rings.

‘What are those?’ asked the vamp. Genuinely interested.

‘Nothing of value,’ admitted Don Dada. ‘Merely the safety pins for the half dozen hand grenades in the box.’

And he smiled.

The resulting explosion ripped through the building like the wrath of God, igniting the gas mains and destroying everything and everyone in a fireball of biblical proportions.

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Chapter 35

William switched off the cell phone, stripped the battery out and broke the sim card in half. It was night time and the five friends had been staying at his New Forest lodge for a couple of days now as they recovered and attempted to formulate some sort of plan.

'Who was that?' asked Emily.

'One of my retainers,' answered William.

'What did they want?'

William took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Almost as though he were trying to expel his emotions. 'The vamps attacked my manor house last night,' he informed. 'Most of the servants got away. Then the blood suckers fired the place and watched it burn.'

'Oh, William,' gasped Em. 'I'm so sorry.'

The Wolfman shrugged. 'It's just bricks and mortar. Two of the servants died, that is far more of a tragedy. I have instructed Bartholomew, my chief retainer, to send the servants and their families to my residence on Auskerry Island in the Orkneys. They'll be safe there. It's probably an unnecessary precaution but rather safe than sorry.'

'So your crib is gone, Wolfman?' asked Tag. 'Yeah,' answered William. 'I'll rebuild it when this is over.'

'But what about allyour stuff,man?' continued the Yardie, a look of concern on his face. William smiled. 'No problems, Tag,' he said. 'It's just stuff. Mere possessions. No sweat.'

Sylvian walked into the living room and stood still for a while. 'I am sorry to hear that, Sir William,' he said. 'Although I must admit, over the last hundred years or so, I have almost forgotten what it was like to have a fixed abode. It is difficult in the extreme to live anything approaching a normal life, when one cannot venture out during the daytime.'

William nodded.

Then, as if it were a pre-rehearsed movement, both William and Sylvian cocked their heads to one side, listening to a sound that only they could hear.

The Bloodborn shook his head. 'Impossible,' he stated.

'I agree,' said William. 'Nevertheless, we can both hear her coming.'

And out of nowhere a massive crow appeared in the center of the room, hovering in the air without moving its wings at all. Blue white fire flickered along its body as it contemplated everyone in the room. Cold black eyes like wet pebbles.

'What the hell?' shouted Tag. 'Where did the vulture come from?'

More blue white fire flashed off the crow as it morphed into an ancient woman, her long gray hair reaching to her knees, her back hunched with age, her face a network of lines and crevices. Only her eyes retained the fire of youth. And like the crows' they were completely black.

She stared at Tag and sneered. 'Vulture? Kiss me backside you chupid quashie. Fyah fi yuh. I's a Crow you mowly eediat.'

Tag's mouth dropped open as he found himself being roundly put down in perfect Jamaican patois. 'Sorry, everyting cook and curry, mama. You'se a crow, I believe.'

The Morrigan nodded her approval and then turned to face both William and Sylvian. ‘Wolfman,’ she greeted. ‘Bloodborn. It’s been a while.’

‘Not long enough,’ returned William. ‘What do you want Morgan, or is it the Morrigan now?’

‘Whatever you would like to use,’ the goddess answered. ‘I come as a friend, not a foe. The darkness approaches and I have come to assist in whatever way that I might.’

‘The cost of your assistance is oft too expensive,’ interjected Sylvian. ‘Ask Arthur or Lancelot. No,’ he continued. ‘You are not welcome here, goddess of battle. We can do without your…assistance.’

‘Wait,’ said the Morrigan. ‘I have good news.’ She turned to face Emily. ‘Come to me, child.’

Em glanced at William who nodded slightly. Then she approached the bent crone and stood in front of her.

The Morrigan reached out, touched Emily on the cheek and smiled. ‘Such power,’ she said, her voice almost a whisper. ‘Raw and untapped but I have not felt such power since the days of the round table. Good, you will need it,’ she continued. ‘And even with the wealth of power that you have, it may not be enough. Anyhow, girl, your master, Merlin, he is alive.’

Emily frowned. ‘Who?’

The Morrigan raised an eyebrow. ‘Merlin Ambros Caledonensis Aurelius Ambrosius. The mage. Leader of the Shadowhunters.’

Emily looked blank for a few seconds then she finally asked again. ‘Merlin?’

‘Merlin Ambros,’ explained Bastian. ‘We call him by his other name. He prefers not to be called Merlin anymore. He took over the leadership of the Olympus Foundation after King Arthur died.’

Emily didn’t look any more enlightened than she had before Bastian’s cryptic explanation.

‘Merlin? King Arthur. When was someone going to tell me all of this?’

The Morrigan shook her head. ‘Doesn’t this child know anything?’ she questioned scornfully.

‘Wait,’ interjected William. ‘I thought that Merlin was dead. I thought that he died many years ago, after Camelot.’

‘Oh no,’ denied the Morrigan. ‘He slept for many moons, recovering. Even as he does now. But never dead. Not Merlin.’

‘I had no idea,’ admitted William. ‘I left after the battle of Camllan and never returned to the cause. To tell the truth, I had enough. And I assumed that our mission had been fulfilled.’

‘As did I,’ added Sylvian. ‘I also left the fold, except that I continued to pursue vamps on a more personal basis. So, Merlin alive? That crafty old conjurer will never cease to amaze me.’

‘So why else are you here, goddess?’ enquired William. ‘I have never known you to go out of your way to bring good tidings. There is always a sting in the Morrigan’s tail.’

‘True,’ admitted the Morrigan. ‘I am oft the bearer of bad tidings. But that is not because I revel in them, it is merely because I do not shy from my duties.’

‘So tell all,’ prompted William.

‘The forces of darkness rail against you,’ said the Morrigan.

‘No shit,’ quipped Emily. ‘Tell us something that we don’t know.’

The Morrigan stared at Emily with contempt. ‘You may have power, child,’ she said. ‘But the scale of what you do not know is so vast that if I had to tell you all, then we would be dust before I finished.’

Emily looked down. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘That was uncalled for. We’ve had a

rough week.'

The Morrigan nodded. 'So you have. But believe me, it shall only get worse.' She turned back to William. 'I have just seen Janus Augusta.'

Both William and Sylvian drew a sharp breath. 'I thought that he was dead,' observed William.

'As did I,' admitted the Morrigan. 'But no such luck. However, it is worse. Not only is he alive, he is now the head of the Italian house of the *Nosferatu* and also the *Capo di tutt'i capi* of the Federation.'

'*Merde,*' swore Sylvian.

'How did the two of you not know this?' asked the Morrigan.

'How did *you* not know?' countered William.

'He is meant to be the mortal enemy of the both of you. Surely you kept track of him?'

'Obviously not,' answered William. 'Like you, we thought that he suffered the true death after the Battle of Camllan. Damn it, I personally saw sir Tristan and sir Lamorak skewer him with their broadswords.'

'But did you see him die?' questioned the Morrigan.

William shook his head. 'Arthur had just been grievously wounded by the vampires and all eyes were on him.'

The Morrigan looked at Sylvian.

He too shook his head. 'As you know, the sun was down, it was dark and we were fighting by torchlight. Sir Bors de Ganis and I were busy rushing to King Arthur's aid. I saw nothing.'

'Well, he is still alive,' she reiterated. 'And is currently the most powerful dark being in the world, not counting the gods, obviously.'

'Talking of which,' said William. 'Any chance of help from that angle?'

The Morrigan shook her head. 'I tried but they are not interested.'

'Oh well, there's a surprise,' quipped Sylvian.

'They feel that you have let them down,' explained the Morrigan. 'Lost faith.'

'That's simply not true,' countered William.

'They mean humanity in general,' continued the Morrigan. 'Not you and Sylvian *per se*.'

'What gods?' asked Em. 'What are you guys talking about?'

'There,' said the Morrigan. 'A case in point. The child doesn't even know of the existence of the gods, let alone worship them.'

'You mean like Thor and Zeus and those dudes?' asked Em.

William shook his head. 'No. The Greek and Roman pantheon have long since abandoned humanity.

When the Christian god became popular, the lack of tangible worship reduced the old gods. Eventually they simply went away. There are still traces of them around but they are almost impossible to contact.'

'Then what gods are you talking about?' asked Emily.

'The Celtic gods, mainly,' continued William. 'You see, even though Christianity has been the predominant religion in the United Kingdom and Europe for centuries, many people still pay homage to the old ways. They worship the old gods of earth and field and water. Even if they aren't aware that they are doing so.'

'I don't get it,' admitted Em. 'How do you pay homage to something and not even know that you are doing it?'

'Much of the worship has lost its true meaning to the people that practice it,' explained William. 'But the mere fact that they still go through the motions imparts a form of worship and this is enough to keep the Celtic gods alive.'

'What motions?'

'Nailing a horseshoe above your doorway to keep out bad luck. Picking a four leaf

clover for good luck. Throwing spilt salt over your shoulder. Knocking on wood. All of these little things are parts of greater ceremonies long since forgotten. But they still have power. The power to call, to entreat and to acknowledge. Enough power to sustain.'

'The point of fact is that you will receive no help from that quarter,' repeated the Morrigan. 'And you will receive no help from Merlin for many months still to come. He is recovering but he was as near to death as to have actually crossed over. It is a tribute to his enormous strength and magical powers that he is still with us.'

William took a deep breath. 'So we're on our own,' he remarked. 'Us and the Yardies. Not the greatest force known to man.'

The Morrigan shook her head.

'What?' asked William. 'Don't tell me, goddess of battle. More bad news?'

'I am truly sorry,' she said. 'Your friends, the men of Jamaican extraction, they are all dead.'

Tag jumped to his feet. 'No way, mama-crow,' he cried. 'What you mean, dead?'

'The vampires,' said the Morrigan. 'Yesterday they overwhelmed them. If it is any consolation, they died well, killing all of the vampires that came for them. However, no Yardies survived.'

Tag buried his head in his hands and Emily walked over to him and put her arm around his shoulders. She said nothing. There was nothing to say. So she merely held him and shared his grief.

'It is time,' said the Morrigan to William. 'Enough lurking and hiding in the shadows, Sir William Townsend. Once more the war is upon you. Call on your allies. Gird your loins and fight the good fight.'

William shook his head. 'Not again. Times have changed. I am no longer that person.'

'You are,' insisted the Morrigan. 'Call them. You are their leader.'

'No,' refuted William. 'I am a lone wolf. I am no longer pack. They have gone their own way.'

'Call them,' repeated the Morrigan.

'They have their own Alpha,' said William. 'I am no longer their leader.'

'They have an Alpha,' agreed the Morrigan. 'But you are the Omega Wolf. You are the leader of leaders. Call and they will come. The game has been played out, Sir William. And this is the only move left to make. It is the only option left open to you. Bring them together once more.'

William stood still for a while, his breathing slow and steady. Finally he spoke.

'You are right, Morrigan,' he admitted. 'I shall call on the packs.'

'Good,' she said. 'When?'

William looked at her and his eyes flashed with power.

'I have just done so,' he said. 'Now we wait.'

The Morrigan smiled in satisfaction. The look was incongruous on her aged and care-worn face. 'My work is done for now.' The air around her shimmered with blue-white light as she transformed back into a giant crow.

Then she cocked her head to one side, flapped her wings.

And she was gone.

'William,' said Emily. 'What the hell is actually going on?'

'Yeah,' agreed Bastian. 'My sentiments exactly.

Tell us what's happening, Wolfman.'

'I have summoned The Pack,' answered William.

'The Pack?' questioned Em.

'The Werewolf pack,' explained Sylvian. 'He has called them. They are coming.'

'What for?' asked Emily.

William turned to face her and his eyes glowed with power as he spoke.

‘They come to serve,’ he answered. ‘They come to destroy. They come to die.’
A low growl escaped his throat. ‘They come for war.’

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Emily Shadowhunter – Book 2: WOLF MAN

When you came in the air went out
And every shadow filled up with doubt
I don't know who you think you are
But before the night is through
I wanna do bad things with you
Jace Everett 2005 (True Blood)

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Chapter 1 – book 2: WOLF MAN

The patch on the back of his leather jacket was so faded that you could only make out the writing in full sunlight.

"Protectors M.C."

He stood at the bar, drinking. The barman had left the bottle of Jack Daniels in front of him. It was simply too much effort to keep filling the man's shot glass every twenty seconds. So instead he concentrated on polishing his beer glasses with a cloth that seemed to be made up of grease and cotton in equal measures, and he left the man to serve himself.

There were only another eight of them in the room, all with the same patch. And they were the sort of men that fill space. Not only by the dint of their physical size, which was impressive, but also because of their presence. One of them could fill a room. Nine of them would have made the super bowl seem crowded.

These were men with presence.

But, although the barman had never seen them before and despite the fact that a room full of nine long haired, leather clad, visibly scarred, well-hard bikers should have filled him with trepidation – he felt at ease. He could sense that these were men that would react to violence but they would never be the root cause.

So he provided the drinks and polished the crockery and didn't mention the fact that smoking indoors was illegal. And anyway, he was thankful for their custom. His pub was situated on an old main road that used to boast traffic and a steady cliental but, since the council had built a bypass, the pub had suddenly found itself in the back of beyond with barely enough traffic to sustain it.

Then he heard the sound of more motorbikes pulling up outside the pub. Big machines with solid throaty engines. Harleys.

The men in the bar went from sitting in a relaxed fashion to standing and alert in one flowing movement.

The sound of the bikes stuttered to a halt as the engines were turned off and, seconds later, another group of men walked into the pub. They were cast from the same mold as the Protectors MC. Large, raw boned but incongruously graceful. Long hair, beards, leather, denim. The patches on their backs read, "Bad Moon MC".

And for the first time the barman noticed that everyone in the room

had the same color eyes. He wondered why he hadn't seen that before. It was so obvious. So undeniably strange.

Pale yellow. With flecks of gold.

Perhaps they were all wearing contact lenses, he thought. Some sort of biker thing. But he knew that these were not the type of men that bothered with cosmetic enhancements. So, instead of dwelling on it he simply polished harder.

One of the newcomers walked up to the man at the bar. The tension was almost visible.

He held out his hand. 'Lucas Cain?' He asked.

The man nodded, took the proffered hand. Shook once.

'Well met,' continued the newcomer. 'I be Jack Wishbone. Alpha of Bad Moon.'

'So you heard the call?' Asked Lucas.

'I did,' admitted Jack. 'We all did.'

Lucas put his empty glass down. 'Well then,' he said. 'Let's go.'

As one, the men trooped out of the pub. They didn't look back. Nor did they bid farewell to the barman.

But when he looked down he saw that, next to the half empty bottle of whisky, the biker had left a pile of notes. A small fortune. Enough to pay for a hundred bottles, let alone the half that he had consumed. He flicked through the notes, baffled at the bizarre display of generosity.

Outside the rumble of engines shook the ground as the combined crew set off.

And the barman, who had fought in both the Falklands and Iraq before he hung up his spurs, couldn't shake the powerful impression that the group of men that he had just seen were going to war.

A war from which they did not all expect to come back from.

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Chapter 2

Nathan had handpicked twenty Enforcers, twelve men and eight women, and commanded them to attend him in the main ballroom. Although they were all masters and were not used to obeying a mere Aspirant, they were all present. For to ignore a *Caporegime* was tantamount to ignoring the master of all masters. And to do that was to invite the true death.

So they came. But they did with an attitude that verged on revolt, so lacking in respect were they.

The ex-Shadowhunter stood in the center of the ballroom. His feet astride, arms behind his back. A military-style at ease position. He was dressed in black leather. Calf high boots, leather pants and a snug fitting, sleeveless, leather singlet. His arms and shoulders were so defined that he looked like a model on an anatomy chart.

His conversion to *Nosferatu*, combined with his existing Shadowhunter physiology had created a being that encompassed all of the attributes of both. Any trace of excess fat and flesh had been burned from him, leaving a network of visible veins and muscle striations. Like cords of rope lashed together over a steel framework. He had retained the Shadowhunter muscle density, strength and speed and had supplemented it with the uncanny additions of the undead. So now he was already twice as powerful as the average Aspirant. But he could feel that he was still enhancing. And if the improvements continued at the same rate, then it was totally possible that in a few more weeks, he would be an entire order of magnitude faster, stronger and quicker than any other *Nosferatu*. That is to say, almost three times their equal.

He was indeed a perfect example of synergistic creation. The sum of the total being more than the sum of the parts.

Nathan was fast becoming an apex-predator amongst other apex-predators.

He let his eyes roam over the twenty brethren standing in front of him. According to Lord Byron these were the best of the best. The strongest, fastest and most ambitious Enforcers. But to his eyes they seemed weak. Arrogant beyond their abilities. Puffed up popinjays used to easy battles against terrified humans or lesser vampires.

That was about to change.

He said nothing. Simply stood and watched. Waiting to see how the dynamic in the room flowed. Who would speak first? Who would

assume leadership and who would wait and judge the situation?

Finally an elder by the name of Junot Carn walked up to him. His self confidence was so strong that it formed a palpable aura around him. An almost visible glow. Hundreds of years of self-belief, assurance and leadership.

'So,' he asked. 'What's this all about, young Aspirant?' He questioned, the sneer in his voice as obvious as his overweening confidence.

Nathan smiled. Or, to put it more truthfully, he pulled back his lips to reveal his teeth. 'I have decided to put together an elite section of Enforcers,' he said. 'Normally this would involve collecting together the very best of the best. Top warriors that would compete for a place amongst the upper echelons of an elite force.'

Junot and others around him smiled at the inferation that they were at the acme of their positions.

'However,' continued the ex-Shadowhunter. 'Instead I was forced to simply take the least worst of those available. A group of twenty, lazy, complacent assassins that have never seen real action, nor fought a real enemy before. A collective of centuries of smugness, self-satisfaction and conceit. For there are no best amongst you.'

Junot stepped forward. 'You go too far, young Aspirant. I protest. You are a mere child. Weeks old. How dare you address us with such a lack of respect?'

Nathan moved so fast that it was as if he had been instantly translocated from where he was standing to appear behind the dissenting Master. He grabbed the vampire by his neck, twisted and then with a small shrug of his shoulders, tore his head off.

Then he stood, holding the dismembered head above him. Letting the blood drip down onto his chest and back. Coating himself in the life-fluids of the dead Master.

'I am *Caporegime*,' he said. His voice barely a whisper. 'I am *Nosferatu*. I am Shadowhunter. My voice is the voice of the master of all masters. I am your leader.'

As one the gathered brethren took a knee and bowed their heads in acquiescence to their new master.

'When I am finished with you, you will be known as the most elite of us all. You will be the very pinnacle of the *Nosferatu*. And you shall be known as, the *Bloodwraiths*.'

Then Nathan walked amongst them, laying his hands on them. Touching their faces. A parent with his beloved children. And he thought to himself that never again would the brethren be beaten by a human girl-child or a gang of street thugs. He would train his *Bloodwraiths*. He would ensure that nothing mortal could stand against them. They would be the ultimate hunters. The acme of all that was *Nosferatu*.

And they would answer only, and directly, to him. They would be Nathan Tremblay's *Bloodwraiths*.

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Chapter 3

A thin film of early morning mist clothed the ground like a shifting shroud as the light breeze shepherded it around, piling it against rocks and tree stumps. The sunlight, pale and watery, peeked through the foliage at a low angle, picking out the vivid greens and silvers of the leaves and the still present spheres of dew that clung to the tips of the blades of grass.

Pigeons cooed in the trees, calling for their mates while, far in the background, the sound of a lone dog barking, echoed through the forest.

And above it all rang the sound of steel clashing against steel.

Em and Bastian moved back and forth across the dew-wet grass, parrying and thrusting, their katanas flashing like silver pike in a stream. Their movements were so fast and continuous that it seemed as if two industrial cooling fans were having a duel. Sweat ran freely down their arms and shoulders and the right side of Bastian's face was slick with blood from a cut above his eye. But still they continued, working as hard as they had ever done so in their lives before.

Bastian was using all of his one hundred years of experience to penetrate Emily's guard. Rolling his wrist as he struck, feinting left and then striking right, moving backwards whilst lunging at the same time. But Em consistently parried his attacks and struck back with her ripostes.

In the background, Tag was doing chin-ups from a low hanging tree branch. Counting them off as he did so, every one coupled with a hissing expulsion of air as he raised his three hundred pound body upwards again and again. He had been training himself even harder, if that were possible, than Em and Bastian over the last few days.

When Em asked him why, he had confided in her that he felt totally inadequate all of the time. He had gone from being a big man, feared on the streets and king of his domain, to a big man who had been beaten up by a young girl and a little Frenchman. So he figured that if he pushed himself to his limits and trained real hard, then at least he could ensure that he would never be beaten by a normal human being. *I'll be the king of the normals*, he had said.

Em slipped as she moved sideways and Bastian jumped at the opportunity to strike, leaning forward and overextending himself as he did.

But Em had been faking it and, as the Jamaican moved past his point

of balance she kicked him in the knee, dropping him to the ground as she did. Bastian rolled over but before he could rise, Em had her blade at his throat.

'Gotcha,' she grinned.

Bastian smiled back. 'You gotten good, girl,' he admitted. 'Real good.'

Emily held her hand out and helped the wiry combatant to his feet. 'I've got a lot to catch up with,' she said.

Bastian shook his head. 'No,' he argued. 'You already caught up. You have a gift,' he continued. 'I knew it when we first met. So did Ambrose. In one day of training back at the Foundation you gained more skill than any other Shadowhunter would have gained in a year. Not sure what it is but whatever – it's freaky.'

'What?' Asked Em. 'You saying that I'm a freak?'

Bastian laughed. 'In the nicest possible way,' he admitted. 'A superfreak.'

Emily punched him on the shoulder. 'Freak yourself,' she giggled.

Their laughter was cut short as William walked out of the front door and stood on the grass in front of them.

He was naked but for his boxers. The low level morning sun reflected off his broad chest, the shadows bringing the massive slabs of corded muscle into sharp relief.

Em noticed that, over the past two days, his hair had grown at an unnatural rate and already it hung past his shoulders. His usual clean shaven look had given way to rough stubble and his eyes had changed completely. Instead of their normal pale, ice-blue they were now a deep midnight-blue. Almost black. Shot through with tiny flecks of silver. Inhuman and cold. Uncanny.

And he had about him an aura of command. An overt feeling of impending danger. Of barely restrained violence.

She had spoken to Sylvian about it and the Frenchman had merely shrugged and said. 'He is pack. He is no longer William-Human. He is William-Wolf. Pack leader and warrior. He is Omega.'

When she had tried to communicate with William he had listened politely and then simply ignored her questions. Not even deigning to answer.

So, in typical Emily fashion, she had stuck her tongue out at him, called him a self-absorbed ass and stormed off to train instead.

Now he stood almost naked and alone. His head held high. Shoulders back. Waiting.

Bastian glanced at Em, a question in his eyes. She shrugged, not sure what William was doing.

They felt the sound more than heard it. A subtle vibration under their feet. Like the beginnings of an earth tremor. A subtle forerunner of a coming disaster. An underground vibration that quickly transformed

into the deep throated roar of over twenty throbbing Harley Davidson motorcycles.

A minute later the convoy rode into the gates and down the driveway. They pulled up in a long line in front of William. Stopping with military precision. Turning off their engines as they did so.

The Pack had arrived.

Stands were kicked down. They dismounted, took three steps forward and took a knee.

Silently they waited.

Anticipation.

Then William started to change. His chest swelled. His face started to protrude as his jaw lengthened and his canines extended. Hair sprouted from his skin. His boxers shredded.

And he morphed gracefully into a full Wolf. Standing higher than an SUV. Bigger than a horse.

More deadly than any living animal since the saber tooth tiger.

The bikers stood and stripped off. Dropping their clothes where they stood. Then they too began to change.

But with them it was not a thing of grace and power. When they changed Emily could see that it was under massive physical duress.

You could actually hear them transforming. The breaking and reforming of bones. The tearing of skin. Their howls of both pain and excitement.

Em covered her ears but she could not tear her eyes off the spectacle. It was both enthralling and terrifying at the same time.

As she watched she noticed that at least six or seven of the bikers were girls. Something that was not immediately apparent while they were still dressed in leather and had helmets on.

And then, with a final shiver of agony - they were Pack.

William wolf threw his head back and howled.

The rest of the pack joined in.

The sound was deafening. Terrible. Primeval. The windows shook and the very earth itself trembled at the ancient call of the wild.

And then they ran. Disappearing into the forest.

Gone.

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Chapter 4

While William and the Pack were out, a group of villagers in a couple of covered trucks had arrived and cleared out the barn. Then they had arranged twenty four camp stretchers along the one wall and a long trestle table and chairs in the middle of the space.

Out of the second truck they unloaded a commercial sized refrigerator that they plugged in and then loaded with meat. Beef steaks. Two inches thick. Hundreds of pounds of bleeding, red meat.

No vegetables.

Next, cases of beer, vodka, brandy and whisky.

Then they left without talking or bidding any farewells.

And now the pack was seated at the table along with Em, Bastian, Tag and Sylvian. Some of them were barbequing piles of steaks on an open fire at the entrance to the barn. Barely heating the meat up before loading it onto large platters and banging it down on the table.

Emily expected them to fall on the food like the pack that they were but instead they sat dead still and waited.

What the hell? *She thought to herself.* What are they waiting for? Grace?

Then she noticed that they were all staring directly at William. He returned their gazes and, slowly and deliberately picked up a slab of bleeding steak with his hands, took a bite and swallowed.

Still they waited.

Then he nodded and they attacked the food like it was trying to escape.

The pack ate with abandon. Some using knives and forks but the majority simply picking the slabs of bleeding meat up in their hands and literally wolfing down large chunks at a time. Both the women and the men.

No one spoke and after a few minutes the sound of chewing and heavy breathing drove Emily from the table. She excused herself and walked outside to stand next to the fire. Taking a break from the savage and primitive atmosphere inside.

It was only when she was standing outside that she noticed another person. He was tall, around six foot two. Hair to his shoulders, unshaven. The firelight glowed in his eyes. Red and gold and black. He was wearing a white t-shirt, faded jeans and biker boots. A young man. Maybe twenty, maybe twenty two. But then Em remembered that werewolves, like Shadowhunters, aged at a vastly different rate to

humans. So he may be as old as seventy or eighty for all she knew.

He nodded at her, acknowledging her presence.

Em noticed that he was smoking and she shook her head. 'Smoking?' She asked. 'Really?'

He grinned and it made his face look younger. Almost a teenager. 'Yep,' he admitted. 'The whole pack smokes. Not sure why. Maybe it's just the biker, bad boy image. Anyway, it doesn't do us any harm. We're immune to stuff like that.'

Em wrinkled her nose. 'But it smells gross,' she pointed out.

He shrugged, dropped the butt onto the floor and ground it out under his boot. Then he held out his hand. 'Troy,' he said. Troy Erikson.'

'Emily Hawk.'

He nodded. 'I know.'

'Oh, how come?' Asked Em.

'You belong to the Omega,' he answered. 'So the Pack knows you.'

Em raised an eyebrow. 'I belong to the Omega?' She asked. 'Let me tell you something, wolfyboy,' she continued. 'I do not belong to anyone. How dare you?'

Troy flushed with embarrassment and Em couldn't help but think – Ha, he blushes too. So I'm not the only one who can't control their autonomic response. Take that, Bastian.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm not explaining it well. It is difficult to explain the concept to one who is not Pack.'

'Well try,' snapped Em.

'There are two packs here today,' said Troy. 'Each pack is controlled by an Alpha wolf. When we are Pack, not human, we cannot communicate verbally, obviously. All communication is done via body language and the Pack mind.'

'Pack mind?' Enquired Em. 'Not quite following that one.'

Troy took a deep breath as he thought. 'The Pack is one,' he said eventually. 'The Alpha controls the mind of the pack. If the Alpha is hungry, the Pack is hungry. But the Alpha eats first. If the Alpha desires someone then the Pack desires them. But it matters not, as the Pack cannot supersede the Alpha. It is acceptable to challenge the Alpha but it is unusual to do so unless the Alpha has grown old and ineffectual. Now take Sir William. He is Omega. He controls the Alphas. So what he thinks, all Packs think. Except he is unassailable. Unchallengeable. So all packs feel what the Omega feels. He is our mind. He is the Pack. I'm sorry. It's real difficult to explain.'

'Okay,' acknowledged Emily. 'I think that I get what you're saying. So, when you stated that I belong to the Omega, what you meant is that the Omega, William, desires me?'

Troy nodded.

'And so, because of that, the whole pack desires me?'

Again the young werewolf nodded.

Emily went bright red. ‘Oh my god.’ Images of the group of muscular, savage, primal men sitting inside the barn, all thinking lustful thoughts about her made her feel weak with consternation and embarrassment. ‘What about the girls?’ She asked Troy, her voice barely above a whisper.

‘Yes, of course,’ he answered. ‘They are Pack.’

‘But…I…’ Em shook her head. ‘I don’t like that. I don’t want them thinking about me like that.’ She stared at Troy. ‘Or you.’

The werewolf looked puzzled for a moment and then he spoke again. ‘Once again, I’ve messed up. It’s not like you think. Please, you cannot think in human terms, Emily. There is nothing sexual about it. The desire of the Pack is merely an extension of the Omega’s desire. Perhaps I have used the incorrect word. Instead, think love, although that is a human concept, because the Pack would not dare to love the Omega’s mate.’

‘I am not his mate,’ snapped Em.

Before Troy could apologize yet again, the two of them were distracted by the sound of someone chuckling softly. They turned to see Sylvian standing behind them, listening to their conversation. ‘Good evening, Emily,’ he drawled. ‘And you too, young wolf.’

‘I didn’t hear you sneak up,’ said Emily.

‘I wasn’t sneaking,’ countered the Bloodborn. ‘But then again, no one ever hears me approach. Even you.’ He looked at Troy. ‘Go inside, young wolf,’ he commanded. ‘I will explain things to Emily in a way that she will understand.’

Troy nodded his acquiescence and left without saying goodbye.

‘What a bunch of chauvinistic butt-holes,’ said Em.

Sylvian laughed. ‘No, not really.’

‘He basically told me that William owns me and that the whole pack desires me.’

‘He’s young. Bright but still callow. I have been around these boys for hundreds of years now and there is only one way to understand them.’

‘What?’ Asked Emily. ‘Please tell me before I go mental.’

‘It’s simple, really. They are animals. Any attempt to prescribe human thought processes or mores to them is simply ludicrous. They exist on a primal level. Alpha say eat, Pack eat. Alpha say hunt, Pack hunt. Omega like girl, all Packs like girl. It’s very basic. Don’t overcomplicate it or your mind will just go around in circles. Think in straight lines and you won’t go far wrong.’

‘But William isn’t like that,’ argued Em.

‘He is when he is with the Pack. Surely you have noticed the change?’

Em nodded.

‘The man that you first met is still there,’ continued Sylvian. ‘But he is now buried deep under the beast. He is Omega. He is Pack.’ He turned from Emily and headed back into the barn. ‘Come,’ he said. ‘It is time. We need to formulate our battle plan.’

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Chapter 5

The food and detritus of the meal had been cleared away and the Pack sat silent. At the head of the table stood William. On his right sat Emily, Sylvian, Bastian and Tag. On his left, Lucas Cain, Alpha of the Protectors M.C. and Jack Wishbone, Alpha of Bad Moon M.C. At the bottom of the table, in the most junior position, was Troy Erikson, or as the pack called him, Puppy.

It had turned out that Em had been spot on when she guessed his age at twenty. He was barely two years older than her and when she found that out she had felt an immediate bond to him, being that everyone else at the table was a minimum of a hundred years older than either of them.

'Life is suffering,' said William.

'To suffer is to live,' answered the Pack.

'The strength of the Pack is the Wolf,' shouted William.

'And the strength of the Wolf is the Pack,' they shouted back at him.

'We gather once again,' continued William. 'To do war upon our mortal enemies. For the first time in many years, my pack brothers, we form to bring hurt to the *Nosferatu*.'

The room vibrated as the Pack growled together. A low, ominous rumbling that made the hair on the back of Em's neck stand up. She turned to look at Tag and she could see that he was visibly shaken. A mere mortal sitting amongst monsters. In his hands he clutched a bottle of Jamaican rum. Dark, sweet and potent. Em could see that it was already half empty. Dutch courage. She winked at him and he smiled back. And, although his grin was tight and forced, she could see that he felt a little better afterwards.

William laid out what had been happening over the past few months. The extermination of the Shadowhunters. The fight-back of the Yardies and their subsequent murders. The visit from the Morrigan and her news that Merlin was alive. And the fact that Janus Augusta was also still alive and had risen to become the leader of the *Nosferatu*.

He then explained that the vampires had vastly increased their numbers of late and outnumbered the Pack by at least thirty to one. Perhaps more.

'That's not a problem,' snarled Lucas Cain. 'They come, we kill them. We win, they die.'

William smiled. 'I like your attitude, Alpha,' he admitted.

‘Unfortunately I must say, even for this Pack, there are too many undead. Ten to one maybe. Twenty, possible. But thirty plus? No. They would overwhelm us by numbers alone. And every day they increase their vile population. We need to make another plan.’

Emily raised her hand.

‘Speak, Shadowhunter,’ said William. ‘No need to put your hand up. This is not a school room.’

There was a ripple of laughter around the table and Em blushed. She was pleased to note that Troy didn’t join in with the merriment, he simply looked at her, eyes hooded, waiting for her to talk.

‘Look,’ she said. ‘I’m new to this whole Pack, werewolfy, life is suffering thing, okay? So bear with me. Firstly, is this it? I mean, where are the rest of you?’

‘There are no others in the United Kingdom,’ answered Lucas. ‘Since the end of the Second World War this has been all that there is.’

‘Why?’ Asked Em. ‘What’s the significance of the Second World War?’

‘The vamps were on the side of the Nazis,’ explained Lucas. ‘We fought them to a standstill and lost many hundreds of our brothers and sisters in the process. We were almost eradicated. Although we won, it was a Pyrrhic victory in a very real sense.’

‘I see,’ said Em. ‘Now, don’t take this the wrong way and all, but can’t you just make more werewolves? You know, like bite them and turn them?’

There was a deathly silence in the barn followed by a low growl from some of the Pack.

Tag immediately stood up and placed himself next to Emily.

‘Quiet,’ commanded William. ‘She means no offence.’ He turned to Em. ‘You were not to know,’ he said. ‘But what you have just implied is considered to be a great insult. We are Pack, we are not vampires. Werewolves can only be born through the union of two full werewolves. And even then the trait seldom breeds true. Especially in the female line. However, even if the progeny are not full werewolves, they are usually gifted physically. Stronger, healthier and faster than a normal. But they are still ostensibly ninety-nine percent human. We call them Purebloods. Their blood is all werewolf but the person is human. Purebloods often go on to do professional sports or, more often, join the military. Boxers, cage fighters, SAS. In fact, most of the SAS are purebloods. They are still considered Pack and we keep track of all of them. So, like the Shadowhunters, our numbers are dwindling while the vamps are increasing.’

‘I am truly sorry for my ignorance,’ said Emily. ‘Forgive me, I meant no insult.’

Lucas nodded once in acceptance.

But Em remained standing. ‘Can’t we use the Purebloods then?’ She

asked.

'We can,' admitted William. 'We have not done so since the war but precedent allows for it. Although it is a radical route to take. We have to tear many from their lives, their jobs, their very existence.'

'Will any of them come?' Asked Emily. 'I mean, leave their jobs, their families.'

Lucas grinned. 'If the Omega calls they will come,' he said. 'They have no choice in the matter. It's a biological imperative. However, they do not possess the psychic link that the Omega has with us. The Omega will have to contact them on a personal basis.'

'Oh well,' sighed William. 'Looks like I'm going on a recruitment drive.'

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Chapter 6

William, Tag and Emily spent the next few days travelling and talking to people. Mainly men. Mainly military and all Purebloods.

The trip started at Credenhill, on the outskirts of Hereford, the main base for the SAS or Special Air Service, probably the most well known elite fighting force in the world. They arrived at the base where they were greeted by the commanding officer, a major Nightingale. He took the three of them to the drill hall.

In the hall, dressed in rows and standing at attention, were a group of some of the hardest men that Emily had ever seen. She did a quick count and figured that there were thirty two of them.

'These men and I are all of the Purebloods on base at the moment,' said the Major. 'We wait for your command.'

So William told them of the current crises, stressing upon them the seriousness of the situation. Underlining the fact that once more, the Pack was called on to do war against one of mankind's darkest enemies. Ensuring that they all knew that they were both the first point of the attack, as well as the last line of defense.

He could have simply commanded them to follow and they would have. There was no way that they could not obey the Omega. But like any great leader, William wanted them to understand. He required them to want to follow him.

And they did.

There was no histrionics, no shouting of mottos or cheering. The men simply picked up their kit, and marched outside and climbed into the two waiting transport trucks that the Colonel had already organized.

Minutes later they had all left the camp, knowing that, although they had as good as gone AWOL, their disappearance would be covered up by other Purebloods that were higher ranking in the organization. Much higher ranking.

But William did not stop there. He and his companions moved on to A Squadron in Regent's Park and then B Squadron in Leeds before they headed home.

It had been a successful trip, during which William, as Omega, had recruited just over one hundred of the fightingest men on the planet.

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William's forest hideaway had been transformed into a military camp. Adjacent to the barn ran a row of fifteen tents that had been

erected by the SAS Purebloods and, in front of the house a large square had been marked out. The Purebloods used this area to train. Everything from physical training to close combat and weapons. A shooting range had been laid out around one hundred yards from the house, the target area a high earthen bank that the Purebloods had built using picks and shovels.

Emily had been mighty impressed by the speed and efficiency that they had shown, converting the entire area in less than a single day.

At the moment, about twenty of the Purebloods were on the square, sparring together in groups of two, practicing unarmed combat. Moving back and forth, striking and counterstriking. Emily and Tag watched for a while and Em noted that their technique was mainly a combination of karate and boxing. All straight lines and power. The method relied solely upon the proponent being faster and stronger than his opponent.

And when you were a Pureblood competing against a human it worked and it worked well. But against a vamp?

'What do you think?' She asked Tag.

'They're fast and tough,' he admitted. 'Strong too, but not as strong as me.'

'Yeah,' concurred Emily. 'They're too static. It's all about attack. They leave themselves open to counterattack. Also, they're simply not fast enough.'

One of the instructors who was overseeing the training glanced over at Em. 'What's that, girl?' he asked. 'You saying that my boys are too slow?'

Emily shook her head. 'I'm saying that they're too slow as well as being too rigid. They overextend when they attack and they're far too static. They wouldn't last two seconds against a vamp, which is a problem.'

As she spoke the rest of the men stopped sparring and turned to stare at her, amazed that a mere female teenager was belittling the combat style of one of the most revered fighting forces in the world.

The man smiled sarcastically. More of a sneer than a confirmation of mirth. 'So I suppose that you could do better,' he said. 'Please,' he bowed and gestured for Em to step forward. 'Show us, princess.'

There was a round of laughter from the Purebloods.

Em nodded. 'Sure,' she said. 'Who should I start with?'

'Well what about me?' Asked the instructor.

Em shook her head. 'No, don't be silly. That wouldn't exactly be a challenge would it?'

The instructor leered his agreement. 'True, why don't you start with Tony over there? He's just recovered from a broken arm so he's a little slower than usual. That suit you, princess?'

‘You misunderstood,’ corrected Emily. ‘I meant that taking on one of you wouldn’t prove anything. How about you and these four nice gentlemen here,’ she gestured towards the closest four men to her.

A flicker of disbelief flashed across the instructor’s face but then he recovered and went with it. ‘Fine,’ he said. ‘It’s your party. Come on you four. Front and center.’

As Em stepped forward Tag grabbed her arm. ‘Careful,’ he said. ‘Don’t kill anyone.’

The instructor laughed. ‘Don’t worry, man,’ he said. ‘We’ll be gentle.’

‘I’m not talking to you, retard,’ snapped Tag.

Em winked at the big man and grinned.

‘Right,’ she said. ‘Let’s do this.’

Em waited for the five combatants to ready themselves before she struck. It was like watching a combine harvester mow down corn. The Purebloods struck hard and fast. But when they struck, Emily was no longer there and all that they did was punch at empty space causing themselves to overextend and put themselves off balance.

Emily, however, did land her punches. Twelve blows later, all of the men were prone, clutching at various parts of their bruised and battered anatomies like survivors of a high speed car crash. She walked over, grasped the instructor by his hand and pulled him to his feet.

‘My name is Emily Hawk. You may call me Em, ma’am, miss Hawk or Emily. But if you call me princess again then I will damage you. Clear?’

The instructor nodded. ‘Crystal, miss Hawk,’ he acknowledged. ‘My name is Jacob Hunt and you can call me whatever you want to.’

The other men stood up and gathered around Em, holding out their hands for her to shake and greeting her with a respectful, ‘Miss Hawk.’

‘Can you show us how to do that?’ Asked one of them.

Em shook her head. ‘I’m going over to the shooting range but I can get Bastian to show you. He’s good. Better than me.’ She turned to Tag. ‘Could you go and call him? Tell him that he’s needed here.’

Tag nodded and jogged off.

‘Are the vamps as fast as you?’ Asked Jacob.

Em shook her head and the men looked relieved. ‘They’re faster,’ she said, dashing their briefly new-found confidence. ‘But they aren’t as strong and as long as you keep moving you can take them. Especially if you shoot them a few times first.’

The men laughed.

Emily bid her farewells and headed off to the shooting range to observe, knowing that Bastian would train the men as well, if not better than she could.

There were twelve men at the range and, as Em got closer, she was

pleased to note that they were using Desert Eagle 357 magnum pistols with extended magazines. Loaded for bear.

Like she had with the combat sparring she simply stood and watched for a while and she had to admit to herself that these men were good. They went through their drills perfectly, drawing, firing, reloading with skill and efficiency.

The only problem was – they wouldn't last three seconds in a firefight with bloodsuckers.

Finally one of the men acknowledged her.

'Morning,' he greeted.

Em walked over to him and offered her hand. He took it and shook firmly. A little too firmly as he expressed his dominance. Childishly, Em decided to play and she squeezed back. But she had to be careful as, whilst she did want to prove a point, she didn't want to actually crush his hand.

The sudden rush of blood from his face and his expression of white hot agony showed that she may have overdone it a little but then, in all fairness, she was getting rather irritable with this constant flow of testosterone and one-upmanship. She had no time for it. They were at war with the vamps, not each other.

'My name's Emily,' she said. 'Emily Hawk.'

She let go of his hand and he let out a sharp breath, like a steam engine venting. 'David,' he managed to grunt. 'Sergeant David Kingsman.' He inspected his hand and then grinned. 'Man, miss Hawk,' he continued. 'That's one hell of a grip you got there. Almost crapped myself when you put the squeeze on. Good for you.'

Emily sighed. She would never understand men and their macho posturing. 'Listen, sergeant,' she said. 'I've been watching your men perform and they are good. Very good.'

'They're the best of the best, ma'am,' answered David proudly, still massaging his hand in an effort to bring it back to life.

Em nodded. 'I'm sure. But there is a problem.'

'What?'

'The way they shoot. Their whole mind-set is incorrect.'

By now the rest of the men had gathered around and were listening. Eyebrows raised and disbelief on their faces.

'I see that you use the Mozambique drill method of shooting,' noted Em.

'Yes, ma'am,' agreed the sergeant. 'Double tap to the torso and then a third shot to the head. Guaranteed to bring anyone and anything down. Failsafe.'

Emily shook her head. 'It might slow a vamp down. But not enough to stop it biting you. Or simply ripping your head off. You have literally got to fill those suckers with silver. One or two mags as fast

as.’

The men looked skeptical.

‘Trust me,’ continued Em. ‘And another thing that you need to realize, you aren’t going to kill them with firepower alone.’ She pointed at the pistols. ‘These are to slow them down so you can get up close and personal with them and then cut their heads off. Or empty an entire mag into their face at point blank range. That normally does it.’ Em held her hand out. ‘Here, let me show you. Can I have two fully loaded Eagles?’

Two of the men handed their firearms to Em. She ejected each mag in turn and checked that they were full, then she stood in front of one of the targets. It was a simple human silhouette standing ten yards away. A standard practice distance. She took a breath, flicked off the safeties then pointed and fired.

The huge handguns hammered back at her, exhibiting massive amounts of recoil but her Shadowhunter enhanced strength ensured that they remained on target. Each extended mag held ten rounds and one up the spout. A total of twenty two shots. Emily cranked them off in just over a second. The retorts were so close together as to sound like one continuous explosion.

And every round struck the silhouette in the intended area, leaving a ragged hole the size of a side plate where the face should be.

There was a slight pause and then the men all cheered.

The sergeant walked up and saluted her. ‘Ma’am,’ he said. ‘We would be honored if you could spend a little time with us and show us just how the hell you did that.’

Em smiled and nodded.

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Chapter 7

Nathan had been on a learning curve that was almost as steep as the one he was imposing on his trainee Bloodwraiths. As he had only been *Nosferatu* for a matter of weeks he was still learning about himself. Testing his own limits.

And it didn't help that he was actually a totally unique entity. A cross between vampire and Shadowhunter.

Over the last few weeks he had learned that vampires could not increase their strength or speed through training. Their basic levels of power were decided solely by the brethrens' age. Any vampire over five hundred years of age was as close to his peak as he or she might ever get. At a thousand plus they didn't seem to get any stronger and, when the very few reached stupendous ages, such Janus, their powers shifted. They changed, becoming less physical and more cerebral.

All of the Bloodwraiths were between five hundred and one thousand years old. Except of course for Nathan who was still but a few weeks.

However, the other major lesson that Nathan had learned was the simple fact that the vampires' natural powers were also their greatest weaknesses.

They were so vastly superior to any normal living being that they tended to rely completely on their inherent speed and power and their ability to heal. So when they came up against a well armed, motivated human, such as the Yardies, or another supernatural being such as a werewolf, they found themselves participating on an almost level playing field. And in the case of a well trained Shadowhunter, the odds were probably slightly against them. In other words, their natural advantages were nullified.

So what Nathan was concentrating on was training his Bloodwraiths in unarmed combat. Standard Shadowhunter training. A blend of karate, savate, boxing and judo. He had decided not to advance their training with bladed weapons, their talons were far stronger and easier to use. As for firearms, they were simply taboo and no *Nosferatu* would ever deign to use them. It was literally unthinkable.

And after a month of incredibly intensive training, Nathan was well pleased with the results.

They were not yet as good as a Shadowhunter but they were close.

'Daniel,' he called the one Bloodwraith. An elder who had been turned some eight hundred years before. 'Choose five Bloodwraiths to help you. As soon as you have chosen I want you to attack me. When

blood is drawn you are out of the fight.'

Daniel bowed his head. 'Sir.' He turned to the group of Bloodwraiths and chose another five whom he considered to be the best.

Nathan stood in the middle of the room. His shirt off. His hands by his side. Relaxed. Thus far he had never been blooded, winning every contest without a scratch. But the last time they had come close and, truth be told, he was hoping that they might beat him this once. It would at last show that his training methods were working.

The Bloodwraiths attacked.

No one held back as blows were traded. Talons fully extended, Nathan ducked and rolled and weaved back and forth, cutting and stabbing as he moved at superhuman speed, delivering up to five or six blows a second. Within moments he had dispatched three Bloodwraiths.

And then he felt a slight sting on his abdomen, just below his navel. He glanced down to see a deep red slash across his stomach and he immediately stopped.

The mêlée of combat halted about him, a frozen tableau of vampires with fangs and talons bared.

Nathan raised an eyebrow and then pointed at his wound. 'Who?' he asked.

Daniel nodded his head nervously.

'Congratulations, Daniel,' said Nathan. 'You have just become my second. Well done.'

Daniel smiled, exposing his fangs still further.

But then he stopped and stared. Nathan noticed that all of the other Bloodwraiths were also looking at him in awe. Staring directly at his wound.

He glanced down but failed to see why they were all so enamored. The deep cut itself had already fully healed and all that was left was a wash of blood.

'What is it, Daniel?' He asked.

'It's your blood, sir,' answered the new second.

'What about it?' Snapped Nathan.

'It glows, sir. It's beautiful. I can see the power in it.'

Nathan looked down once again but he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

'If you say so, Bloodwraith,' he said. 'Now, let's call it a day. Well done all, we are achieving great things.'

And the ex-Shadowhunter walked off, wondering what exactly it was that the rest of his brethren were seeing in his life's-blood.

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Chapter 8

‘If we catch them we can kill them,’ stated William. ‘Now, catching them piecemeal isn’t that difficult. Em and the Yardies did a good job of that. Took out quite a few of the leeches. But, invariably, overuse of the same tactic led to an ambush and ultimately, defeat.’

Em, who was once again seated at William’s right hand, felt a wave of guilt wash over her. It had been her fault. Her overweening arrogance and self-belief that had led to that ambush and the subsequent massacre of the Yardies. Of her friends.

‘We need to cut off their food supply,’ said Lucas.

‘How?’ Questioned Jack, the Alpha of Bad Moon M.C. ‘They feed on humans. We can’t kill all of the humans just to deny the vamps. It’s a bit self-defeating if you ask me.’

‘Less sarcasm and more thought,’ growled Lucas. ‘All that I’m saying is, they tend to feed at the clubs. Entice the Goths and the wannabees, lure them in. Eat them. So, hitting the vampire clubs wasn’t a bad idea. The problem was that they only hit clubs in the London area. All the vamps had to do was set an ambush at a couple of the clubs and wait. Eventually the Yardies would pitch up there and then the vamps would spring the trap. But if we formed a large number of task groups and then started to hit clubs and dens on a country-wide basis. Random strikes. London, Edinburgh, Bristol, Leeds. Then they would find it hard to fight back. You can’t ambush us if there’s no rhyme or reason to our attacks.’

William nodded. ‘You speak the truth, Alpha Lucas.’

‘I agree,’ concurred Jack. ‘Also, how can we find out where some of their dens are? It would be great if we could hit them at home a few times. That would really screw with their confidence. They wouldn’t feel safe anywhere.’

‘Right,’ said William. ‘Let’s do it. Four attack groups. We shall designate them, Charlie, Delta, Echo and Foxtrot. Each group will have five wolves and twenty five purebloods. A force that size should be capable of taking on pretty much anything.’

There was a ripple of agreement around the table.

‘Lucas,’ continued William. ‘Charlie team. London.’ Lucas nodded. William looked at Rufus Gray, Lucas’ beta. ‘You, Echo team. Edinburgh. Jack, you take Delta Team and go to Manchester. Your Beta, Mike Stable can take Foxtrot Team to Exeter. That gives us a nice even spread around the country. I’ll supply you all with cash.

Stay in local hotels. One or two star only. Below the radar. I'll also give you a bunch of burner phones to keep in touch. The numbers will be programmed in. Use once and break. Got it?'

Everyone nodded and voiced their acknowledgement.

'I can help,' interjected Tag. 'I'll give you all a list of whatever contacts I have in those cities and surrounds. These boys know the streets and clubs. They'll give you good info on where the blood-sucker clubs are. You'll have to pay for the info but they won't overcharge if they know that you're with me.'

'Good one, Tag,' said William. 'Okay, Pack. Let's do it.'

There was a general hubbub of activity as the Alphas and Betas picked their teams and sorted out their chains of command.

William took Emily to one side. 'We'll stay here,' he said to her. 'You, Tag, Bastian, Sylvian and I. Then we'll provide roaming back up if anything goes bad with one of the teams. I've also got another few ideas that I'd like to put in place.'

'Cool,' nodded Em. 'What ideas?'

'There's a guy that I'd like to get hold of. I'll need to go and find him though, perhaps you can come along. He's sort of an old inventor. Actually used to be an alchemist back in the day. I met him when he was working for King James the 1st. Total loon but a genuine genius. Figured that he could help us with new weapons and gadgets. It's an off-the-wall hope but figured that anything is worth a try.'

'You mean, sort of like Q in James Bond?' Asked Em.

William laughed. 'That sort of thing,' he agreed.

'Great, when do we go?' Questioned Em. 'I'm going a bit stir crazy here, so a bit of a break would be cool. Where is he and what's his name?'

'I think that he's been going as Professor Albert Brownstone for the past hundred years or so. Last I heard he was a resident at Cambridge University, so we'll start there. We'll leave as soon as the teams have gone. Tell Tag that he must stay here. I know that he'll be upset but it would be nice to go somewhere without the big guy dogging your every footstep.'

'I'll tell him,' agreed Em.

As it happened, they only managed to leave the next day as William had to pull in some favors and spend an eye-watering quantity of money on organizing transport for the teams. The wolves all had the Harleys but the Purebloods needed motor vehicles. After making a few calls, a fleet of twenty-two miscellaneous vehicles were delivered to the property. They were all 4x4, late model and the engines were in top condition. Landrover, Toyota, Mitsubishi and Volkswagen. The place looked like a used car dealers plot, albeit a very honest dealer who only sold A-grade used vehicles.

William selected a dark blue Landrover Discovery for himself and he and Emily left at just after midday, heading for the town of Cambridge.

As they were driving off, Em looked in the rearview mirror to see Tag staring at them leaving; a hangdog expression on his face like his owner had just left him at the pound, never to return. But then she forced down her feelings of guilt and settled back for the three hour drive.

They entered Cambridge from the south and took the ring road to the university.

'Last time that I saw the Prof, he was staying in rooms above the main gates to Corpus Christi College, so I reckon that's where we start.'

'I thought that you said he was at the university,' said Em. 'Not some college.'

'The university is made up of colleges,' explained William. 'Corpus Christi is one of the oldest. They're sort of a hall of residence for the scholars and staff.' He pulled down a narrow side street and parked the Landrover. 'We'll walk from here,' he said. 'You can't park any closer.'

So Em followed him through the cobbled streets, marveling at the ancient buildings and profusion of students and lecturers, many of them clad in traditional academic gowns, as they had so many hundreds of years before.

The massive main gates to the college loomed huge above them. Light ochre stone walls, mullioned windows and intricate stonework. William pointed to a small set of dormer windows above and to the left. 'He used to be up there and I have no reason to believe that he's moved. Come on.'

They walked through the gates and, as William was about to turn to the right, someone called out to him. The voice a sound of gravel under foot. Em looked around to see a man, probably late fifties, stout and dressed in a dark suit, regimental tie, white shirt and black Oxfords. On his head a bowler hat.

'Sir William, and how are we today, young Sir?'

William smiled. 'Henry. What an absolute pleasure to see you. All good? How's missus Jaggard?'

'Passed away, young Sir,' answered Henry. 'Weak chest, bless her soul.'

'Sorry to hear that, Henry.'

'And to what do we owe the pleasure, Sir William?'

'Actually, I was looking for professor Brownstone. Wondered if he was still about.'

Henry nodded. 'Still here, sir. Same rooms.' He pointed using his

chin. ‘Above the tower.’

‘Thank you, Henry. And once again, my sympathies.’

Henry nodded. ‘Sir,’ he doffed his hat at Emily. ‘Young miss.’ Then he turned on his heel and marched off, swinging his arms in a military fashion.

‘Who was that?’ Asked Em.

‘Head Porter,’ answered William. ‘Sergeant Major Henry Jaggard. Good sort. Very strict. Often used to catch me sneaking in after hours. Used to give me a damn good thrashing, which we all preferred to being put on report.’

‘So you went to Cambridge?’

‘Yes, Corpus Christi.’

‘But that must have been…’

‘Oh, hundreds of years back,’ admitted William.

‘So obviously Henry the porter isn’t human then,’ noted Em. ‘What is he?’

William grinned. ‘Oddly, Henry is one hundred percent human. As are all of the porters. Don’t ask me how he’s been around for so long because I genuinely do not know. And it would be awfully bad form to ask him. As far as we could all work out, it appears that the porters work outside of the normal constrictions of time and space. That’s why they always know what everyone is doing all of the time. Believe me, if you need to know anything about the town, the university or anyone in it, then ask one of the porters. He will know.’

Em sighed. ‘This is doing my head in,’ she said. ‘It’s so unbelievable that it must be true. I mean, who would make stuff like that up? Anyway, let’s go and meet this professor of yours.’

William laughed and led the way to a small door set back in the stone wall. It was slightly lower and slightly narrower than a normal door and, for some reason, unless you looked directly at it and concentrated really hard, it simply wasn’t there. When Em remarked about that William nodded.

‘Secret door,’ he said. ‘Well, not secret, more like a shy door. Doesn’t want to be seen. So unless you know that it’s there, then it isn’t. Great if you don’t want uninvited guests.’

William opened the door and walked in.

‘It’s unlocked,’ noted Em.

‘No. It’s locked using wards. Basic protection spells. The wards know me, so they let me in. If a stranger did notice the door and tried to get in then it simply wouldn’t open.’

‘Pretty cool,’ said Em as she followed William up a stone, spiral staircase. The stairway twisted so sharply and was so cramped that William had to turn sideways to fit his broad shoulders in and even then he was scraping the walls as he went up.

The stairs opened into a room. High ceilings, stone walls, lots of mullioned windows. To Emily it looked as if the interior of the building was at least five or six times larger than the exterior. Not long before she would have thought that it was a mere optical illusion of some sort. But now she knew that it was probably far more likely that the Prof had somehow bent space or warped it or something equally as weird.

At the far end of the long room stood a wizened old man. He was dressed in a tweed suit and his hair stuck out about his head like a ball of cotton-candy. He was surrounded by literally hundreds of bubbling retorts and beakers and dishes. Multi-colored liquids ran through glass tubes, steam escaped shining steel vessels and a light-yellow miasma hung in the air. It smelled of aniseed.

He looked up. Blinked furiously and then let out a joyful yell.

'William, old boy,' he shouted as he walked over, his legs stiff, like a penguin. He grabbed the Wolfman in an embrace. 'Wonderful,' he said.

'Good to see you, Prof,' returned William. 'It's been a while.'

'So it has,' agreed the Prof. 'Months I would say.'

William laughed. 'A little longer than that, Prof.'

The old man stared at William suspiciously. 'Oh? Really? What's the date then?'

'Wednesday. Third of March.'

'The year,' snapped the Prof. 'What year is it?'

'Two thousand and sixteen,' informed William.

'Goodness me,' exclaimed the Professor in astonishment. 'That would mean it's been…' he paused. 'Over two hundred years since we last saw each other.'

William nodded.

'My,' continued the Prof. 'How time flies. Now who is this delightful creature?' He enquired as he gestured towards Emily.

'Professor, may I introduce miss Emily Hawk?'

'You certainly may, old boy,' chuckled the old man as he stuck out his hand. 'Name's Albert. Damned pleased to meet you.'

'And I you,' said Emily. 'So, professor,' she continued. 'What exactly are you? A scientist or a magician?'

'Good question,' answered the Prof. 'Answer is a little cryptic, though. I'd say that I'm both. And neither. Really all that I do is mix things together and see what happens. Trial and error. Fortunately I have time on my side so I tend to get a lot done, even though it's probably not the most efficient way of going about things. Still, it's pretty much how all of the great discoveries have taken place. Men with a yearning to learn, simply mixing stuff together and hoping that it doesn't explode. Or, in some cases, that it does.'

Emily laughed. ‘So you’re saying that most of mankind’s discoveries were just a bunch of people doing random stuff to see what happened?’

The Prof smiled. ‘The first cure for malaria was Quinine. Found in the bark of the cinchona tree. Tastes awful. So how was that discovered? Most likely some curious chap wandered about chewing tree bark until his malaria went away. At the same time there must have been hundreds of others who ate grasses, insects, all sorts of things in the hope of curing themselves. The bark worked. That’s what I do. I am essentially a simple bark-chewer hoping to find new and exciting accidents.’

‘Well we need you to chew some bark for us, Professor,’ said William. ‘Let me explain.’

And William brought the Prof up to date with events, starting at the very beginning and leaving nothing out. The story took over two hours in the telling and, as the Wolfman finished, Professor Brownstone was already loading various bits of equipment into a bag.

‘I shall bring the absolute necessities,’ he said. ‘The rest you can acquire for me when we get to your base. I have many ideas on the backburner, old boy,’ he continued. ‘I’m sure that you shall be very impressed. Well, if I can bring them to fruition. But these evil leeches must be stopped. I have always nurtured a deep and abiding hatred for the undead.’ He shook his head. ‘They must go.’

They left only minutes later to begin the three hour drive back to the New Forest, the Prof sitting in the back of the Landrover, mumbling and nodding to himself the whole way as he jotted down notes on a scrappy piece of paper.

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Chapter 9

Tag watched Emily drive off with a sinking feeling in his heart. He knew that she needed some time alone. Or at least some time without him protectively looking over her shoulder twenty-four seven. Tag wasn't a stupid man. He was gruff and rough and big and bad. But he knew that his self-appointed role as Emily's bodyguard was little more than a ceremonial position. Meaning that he knew if someone attacked the Shadowhunter and she couldn't defeat them, then there was no way on God's Earth that he was actually going to be of any help whatsoever. The fact of the matter was that Em could flatten him with a single punch.

But he was willing to take a bullet for her. He was willing to kill and to die for the teenage girl. And he needed the position more than she needed him. Because without it he felt completely useless.

Formally the top dog in his group, he was now at the very bottom of the pecking order, surrounded by werewolves and Purebloods and shapeshifters, all who were blessed with unnatural strength and speed and power far beyond the norm. All he had going for him was his size and his willingness to stand up and be counted. He thought for a while and then he set off to find Lucas Cain, the Alpha of The Protectors and the leader of Charlie group.

'Hey, Lucas,' he greeted when he saw him.

The Alpha turned to face the Yardie and nodded, taciturn as usual.

'Listen, boss,' continued Tag. 'Your group is going to London. I think that I better come with you. It's my town and I can be a lot of help with information on the street.'

Lucas stared at the big man for a while and then nodded. 'Okay. Tool up, we leave in an hour.'

Tag grinned and went to kit up and prepare, happy to be needed.

***

Tag directed Charlie team to a road in Earl's Court. Once a row of massive privately owned Victorian houses, it was now a motley collection of one star hotels and licensed accommodation. Places that didn't ask for identification, dealt in cash and didn't care that you signed the guest book as Donald Duck and associates.

The team spread themselves amongst the hotels, checking five of them in at each one, paying cash and then meeting in a car park

situated down a narrow side street.

'Tag is going to do a recce,' said Lucas. Then he pointed out one of the wolves. 'Simon, you go with him. Make sure that he isn't being tailed and ensure that he comes to no harm.'

'Hey,' objected Tag. 'I don't need no bodyguard. I am the bodyguard.'

Lucas looked at Tag, unblinking, his eyes two shimmering orbs of gold. 'You are what I say you are,' he stated. 'And you do as I say that you do.'

Tag took note of the Wolfman's total confidence and absolute assumption that he would be obeyed. He was Alpha. His word was iron.

The Yardie nodded. 'Come on, Simon,' he said. 'Let's hit the streets and find us some vamps to put down.'

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Chapter 10

The Professor stood outside the house, his head cocked to one side, his nose twitching slightly. Like a dormouse. His tweed hat was cocked to the back of his head exposing a dandelion-fluff of white hair and a high smooth forehead.

'I've been here before,' he said.

'Yes,' agreed William. 'A long time ago.'

'I remember,' continued the Prof. 'You had some awful relative staying with you. Some Duke or Count or something.'

'Baron Otto Von Righoven,' admitted William. 'Although he wasn't a relative. Simply an old family friend.'

'Terrible fellow,' said the Prof. 'Obsessed with hunting, as I recall. Spent his whole day with a musket, looking for deer to murder.'

'If memory serves,' added William. 'I do believe that you put a stop to that.'

'I did, I did,' concurred the Prof.

'How?' Asked Emily, genuinely curious.

'Oh, simple really, slipped a potion into his morning tea. Idiot spent the rest of his stay thinking that he was a travelling clairvoyant called madam Zelda and kept trying to read everyone's palms. Complete fool.'

Emily giggled. 'Good,' she said. 'I don't think that I like the sound of him.'

William shook his head. 'Not so good, poor old Otto never recovered. Spent his dotage in an asylum for the insane, insisting that the carnival had left town without him.'

'Serves him right,' snorted the Prof. 'Trying to prove his manhood by blowing the heads off innocent animals. Now, William, good chap. Show me my room and my laboratory and I shall get to work. Time is wasting as we speak.'

William showed the old man his digs and then told him that he could select any room that he wanted for a lab. After he had done so he must simply make a list of everything that he needed and William would ensure that it arrived poste-haste.

'Correct me if I'm wrong,' said Em to William as they left the Prof. 'But when he just got angry, he seemed to grow. A foot or so at least. Also, he suddenly didn't seem as old.'

William chuckled. 'Yeah, he tends to do that when he loses control. He's not human, you know.'

‘Oh, duh,’ countered Em. ‘Really? I thought that he was one of those rare three hundred year old people that I keep hearing about. Obviously he’s not human. What is he?’

‘Actually he’s a Boggart. A type of large male fairy, obsessed with the gaining of knowledge. Also very protective over animals. Extremely old. Much more than three hundred years, as it happens. I know that it’s a long shot but who knows, perhaps he can come up with some sort of weapon that could help us.’

‘Worth a try,’ admitted Em. ‘Let’s get something to eat. I’m starving. Again.’

Emily made herself a pile of sandwiches while William simply threw a few steaks into a pan and warmed them through.

By the time that they had eaten, the Prof had come through with two hand-written pages of things that he needed.

William glanced over them. ‘Some of these I can get in the next couple of days,’ he noted. ‘Other items are a little more obscure. Might take a week or so.’

‘As swiftly as you can, old chap,’ urged the Prof. ‘Things to do, don’t you know? Things to do.’

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Chapter 11

Tag was finding things a little more difficult than he had expected. Ever since the bloodsuckers had murdered the last of his people, the streets had been taken over by a new gang. A mixture of Eastern Europeans, mainly Russians and Ukrainians. Unlike the Yardies who had sold marijuana, scalped tickets and traded in bootleg music and DVDs, the Russians were much more hard-core. Badly cut cocaine, amphetamines and ketamine.

And their street dealers weren't the happy-go-lucky Rasta stoners. Instead they had been replaced with hard-eyed thugs whose job was to sell misery at a profit. Many of Tag's informants had been pushed to the periphery of the street trade and their knowledge of what was happening was now severely limited. However, they did know who Tag could approach and they were only too happy to tell him, for a small fee.

So he found himself with Simon at the end of a dark, narrow alleyway in the center of Soho, London, talking to three Russian drug dealers.

'I don't know anything about Goth clubs or Vampires,' said the one dealer. 'Go away, you're wasting my time.'

'Listen, friend,' said Tag. 'All I want to know is where the Goths and Vamp wannabees are hanging out of late. I know that they're all into recreational drugs, so that means that you know where, and who, they are. Now make it easy on yourself and tell us. We'll even make it worth your while.'

'Go away, *mudak*.' Snapped one of the other dealers.

'What?' Questioned Tag. 'What you say?'

'He called you an asshole,' said Simon.

'Really? He's a drug dealer and he calls me an asshole?' Tag backhanded the man across the face, spinning him around with the force of the blow. 'I try to be decent and look where it gets me.'

Almost as one, all three of the Russians drew knives. Large oversized blades almost as big as meat-cleavers.

'You have made big mistake, *mudak*,' said the one. 'Now we cut you bad.'

Tag stepped backwards as he tried to keep all three of the men in his field of vision. It was difficult as they fanned out in front of him. He hadn't brought a weapon as he had not anticipated having to use one. And now he sincerely regretted that decision. Until he heard a growl

behind him.

A deep rumbling sound of terror inducing cadence. Deep and loud enough to feel in your gut as it literally grabbed hold of your viscera and gave them a shake. And Tag didn't need to look around to see what was making that primeval sound. He knew.

The three men opposite him, however, had never seen such a sight before. And when the massive wolf stalked past Tag, its lips peeled back to reveal three inch long canines, thick ropes of saliva hanging from its chops and its eyes afire with the very essence of barely restrained violence. They simply dropped their knives and sank to their knees.

Tag grinned. 'So, any of you lads want to give me some information or would you rather the Wolfman chewed your faces off?'

Minutes later the Russian were fleeing from the scene and Tag and Simon knew pretty much everything that they needed to know.

***

Lucas Cain had narrowed it down to two clubs. One was a large nightclub in an old converted department store in Kilburn, appropriately named 'The Department Store'. The other was a place called 'The Midnight Rendezvous', a late night jazz club on the outskirts of Fulham.

He had sent a group of Purebloods out to recce them during the day and had decided that they were going to hit both of them that very night.

The theory was that the leeches would never suspect two hits in as many hours. And then Charlie team would lay low for a while until the heat went down before they struck again. Tag loved the idea. It sat really well with his 'hit-hard-and-fast' attitude towards battle.

They chose to do The Department Store first. They weren't splitting into two separate teams as Lucas wanted to go in full-handed and make sure that they absolutely overwhelmed any opposition.

So, at a quarter to twelve they gathered across from The Department Store. As the target was so large they decided to hit it from three directions at once. Tag and ten Purebloods were going to go in through the front entrance. There was to be no subtlety involved, they were planning on simply walking in, pushing the doormen into the club and then closing the doors and locking them with a length of silver coated chain and a padlock. Three Purebloods would wait outside to ensure no one else entered or left.

The second group of ten Purebloods would enter through the back entrance, securing it as they did so. Then they would simply sweep and clear until they met up with group number one.

Lucas would be bringing the wolves in from above. They were going

to scale the next door building and come in through the skylights, working their way down through the top two floors to the ground.

Afterwards they would leave via the rear entrance, run to their transport and drive to the Midnight Rendezvous jazz club where the next bout of extermination would take place.

The other group of Purebloods and the wolves had already left to their ingress points when Tag glanced at his watch. Ten minutes to midnight.

'Right,' he said. 'It's time. Let's do this.'

The eleven of them strode across the street to the club entrance. There was a short queue outside. Maybe six people. Al dressed in faux Victorian garb, black overcoats, lacy shirts and Goth makeup.

At the door stood two bouncers. Both looked human. Big men with ill fitting black suits, shaven heads and permanent sneers.

'Go home,' Tag told the wannabees. 'Club's being closed for the night. Health code violations.'

'Hey,' yelled one of the Goths. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean that if you stay here it's gonna be real bad for your health. So piss off,' snapped Tag.

The queue melted into the night as the Goths decided that discretion was the better part of valor.

Then, before the doormen could do anything about it, the Purebloods simply forced them inside, pushing them in like they were herding a pair of oxen. Tag closed the doors and thread the chain through the handles, pulling it tight and locking it with a large iron padlock.

'What the hell do you think that you're doing?' Shouted one of the doormen.

Tag was about to punch him out but before he could, two of the Purebloods drew their silenced MP5 submachine guns and put a three round burst into each of them, killing them instantly.

'Jesus man,' yelped Tag. 'Damn it. Why?'

'Lucas' orders,' replied sergeant Jacob Hunt. 'Anyone who works for the vamps gets taken out. No mercy. We're at war and that's how you win a war.'

Tag looked at the man, noting the expression in his eyes. They were cold. Unfeeling. Professional.

'Okay,' agreed the Yardie. 'But next time keep me in the loop.'

'Whatever,' shrugged the Pureblood. 'Let's move.'

They walked into the club. Tag was impressed with the way the Purebloods handled themselves. No one rushed. There was no running, no extraneous movement. They were quick, thorough and methodical.

And deadly.

Like the vamp clubs that Tag had been to before, this was a simple

variation on the theme. Scattered tables and chairs, curtained booths, low lighting. Young men and women lying down, or slumped across tables while the blood suckers fed on them. The lighting in the club was predominantly dark red and it made blood appear to be black. The whole vista was a B-grade version of hell.

The muzzle flashes of the automatic weapons stitched lines of light across the room as the Purebloods opened up, killing all who were there.

The silenced weapons sounded like a myriad of giant typewriters or dot-matrix printers. A deep purring sound that was completely at odds with the destruction that they wrought.

Vamps sprang to their feet and attacked but the Purebloods were no ordinary humans and the leeches couldn't even get close before one of the soldiers had filled its face with silver tipped lead, blowing it apart so that they had no chance of healing.

Then they saw the other group of Purebloods that had entered from the rear. They had cleared and secured the back half of the building and they nodded as they met in the middle.

Seconds later a pack of snarling, blood coated werewolves came sprinting out of the stairwell and into the main club area.

Tag counted them. Five, all present. Obviously the top floors had been cleared as well. One of the purebloods fired his weapon at the DJ booth, shredding the sound equipment and the room fell into silence.

The pack led the way out of the back of the building and, just before they exited, one of the Purebloods threw a brace of thermite grenades in and closed the door. There was a dull crump from inside the building and flames started to lick at the windows and doors, hungry to consume and destroy.

'Hey,' snapped Tag. 'That fire could spread.'

'Collateral damage,' answered Jacob. 'Total war means total commitment.'

Tag felt uncomfortable as he followed the wolves and their brothers back to the transport so that they could get to the next club. He was in way over his head and he wished that he was back with Em. At least then he knew his mission parameters. Defend Emily Hawk. Give your life for hers if need be. Nice and simple with no gray areas.

The Midnight Rendezvous jazz club was smaller. Ground floor. The wolves went in the back and the Purebloods flooded through the front entrance like a tidal wave of retribution.

Once again Tag was both shocked and impressed at the cold professionalism they displayed as they dispatched their targets.

The whole thing was over in less than a minute. Then Tag heard shouting from the back of the club and, when he went to investigate, he found a locked door. Behind it people were yelling to be let out.

One of the wolves simply ran at the reinforced oak door and smashed it out of the way. The room held around six young humans, both male and female, their expressions a mixture of relief at being rescued and fear at the sight of the werewolves.

'Thank God,' gasped one of them. 'They locked us in here. They're real vampires,' he continued. I swear, actually real blood-sucking undead. They were going to eat us.'

'It's okay,' assured Tag. 'It's over.'

But before the captives could leave the room two of the Purebloods opened up on them, filling the area with a fusillade of lead, cutting them to the floor. Killing them instantly.

Tag grabbed one of the shooters by his neck. 'What are doing?' He shouted. 'They're kids. Prisoners of the vamps. Innocents.'

Jacob slapped Tag on the side of the head, hard enough to spin him around. 'There are no innocents,' he snapped. 'They were fraternizing with the leeches. They are tarnished by association. All familiars must die. All suppliers, all friends, all knowledge. All must die. Wake up, Tag,' he continued. 'The Pack have fought this war before. No time for mister nice guy.'

The big Yardie took a deep breath and shook his head. 'It's not right, man,' he argued. 'It's just not right.'

Jacob nodded in agreement. 'No,' he said. 'It isn't. But it's the only way to win the war.'

They exited via the rear entrance, lobbing a bunch of thermite grenades into the building as they did.

The Pack had struck their first blow.

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Chapter 12

Tag had left Charlie team in London and returned to the forest hideout. He told Alpha Lucas Cain that he needed to get back to Emily, as he was officially her bodyguard. And anyway, his work was done. The team had more than enough information regarding the vamps and their London based clubs.

But if he was honest to himself, Tag had to admit that he had left because he just didn't think that he could participate in another raid. Killing vamps was one thing, he had nothing against that. In fact, he enjoyed it. But exterminating their familiars, innocent participants and mere employees did not sit well with the big man. It was too close to murder and he simply couldn't stomach it.

But now he was back he was starting to get bored. There is a limit to how much one could train in a day, so he had taken to hanging around in the Prof's lab in the afternoons and early evenings. Tag found the old man interesting, knowledgeable and entertaining. Also the Prof welcomed his help and Tag needed to be useful.

The Prof mumbled to himself as he placed a hand grenade on the desk. Next he picked up a small canister, about the size of a can of soda. It was painted dull green and the top was open. He proceeded to pack a thin lining of plastic explosive around the inside, leaving a hollow well in the middle. Then, into the well, he poured a large quantity of silver powder. Silver metal ground up as fine as baking powder. After that he placed a detonator into a lid, screwed the lid on and attached a manual activator onto the top of it.

'Wassup, Prof?' Asked the big man.

'Something that I've been playing with,' answered the professor. 'The grenade is simple. All I did was take out the steel balls that they use for shrapnel and replace them with silver. Bang - and a nasty surprise for the vamps. They only thing is that it's a little indiscriminate. Hard to avoid injury to innocents. Could be a bit of a problem with collateral damage.'

Tag snorted. 'I wouldn't worry about that, Prof,' he commented. 'The Purebloods genuinely don't give a monkey's about collateral damage. Anything or anyone gets in their way, they simply break it or kill it.'

The Prof raised an eyebrow. 'I take it that you don't approve.'

'Do you?'

Professor Brownstone shook his head. 'Not at all. Human life is precious. Vampires are, ostensibly, already dead, so whatever happens

to them doesn't bother me in the slightest.'

'Well you and me are in the minority, prof,' said Tag. 'It's all total war and such-what. Whatever the hell that means.'

'Hmm, Total War,' mused the Prof. 'Technically, that would be a military conflict in which the contenders are willing to make any sacrifice in lives and other resources to obtain a complete victory.'

'Yeah, I'd say that pretty much sums it up,' agreed Tag. 'I suppose that they're correct but personally, I can't take it.'

'Well maybe this little chap here will help,' said the Prof as he picked up the soda can grenade. 'A small explosive to act as a dispersant to the silver powder. I'm hoping that you throw this into a room. Bang. Fills the air with microscopic bits of pure silver. The vamps breathe it in and it burns the living hell out of their insides.'

Tag smiled. 'Sounds cool. Also, shouldn't harm the humans. What about the wolves?'

The Prof shook his head. 'Silver doesn't bother them. It's a myth started by the Brothers Grimm fairy tales. Rubbish.'

'So will it work?'

The Prof shrugged. 'I think so. What I really need is a test subject.'

'What, you mean like a captive vamp to experiment on? Not sure how ethical that is, prof,' suggested Tag.

'What do ethics have to do with a dead thing?' Asked the professor. 'That is like saying that one shouldn't experiment on a side of beef. Worse, an evil side of beef. Believe me, mister Tag,' he continued. 'I have no qualms about conducting any experiments on an undead leech. Far from it.'

Tag thought for a while before he spoke. 'I can get you one,' he said.

'How?'

Not sure. Where there's a will, there's a way.'

'Not always,' disagreed the Prof. 'Sometimes, where there is a will there is a dead person with his throat torn out by a vampire.'

Tag laughed. 'Yeah, not as well known an expression but I get where you're coming from. Anyway, I'll put some thought into it. Maybe one of the superhumans can give me a hand.'

'They're not superhuman, Tag,' countered the Prof as he tinkered with a detonator. 'They are simply preternatural. To put it bluntly, they are not human. Emily, William, the Purebloods, myself. Not human. You are human. And believe me, there is nothing to be ashamed of about that.'

'I know,' said Tag. 'It's just that I feel so bloody inadequate. Everyone is faster, stronger, better than me.'

'No,' disagreed the Prof. 'Faster and stronger, yes. Better? I think not. Anyway, what do you see as your biggest asset?'

'I used to say my strength,' answered Tag. 'I was always stronger than

anyone that I ever met. Must say, it's been a steep ride downhill from those days.'

'So you want to be enhanced, do you?' Asked the Prof.

'Obviously,' answered Tag. 'Doesn't everyone?'

'Maybe. It's not that complicated, you know.'

'What do you mean?' Asked Tag.

'To enhance someone. A human, that is. It's not that difficult. I mean, anabolic steroids increase strength. Caffeine helps mental alertness. It's not that difficult.'

'Well, maybe,' admitted Tag. 'If you want to be a steroid raging caffeine addict, then you might obtain a small advantage. But the pluses don't outweigh the minuses.'

'I wasn't being literal,' continued the Prof. 'What I am saying is that I could put together a potion that would magically enhance you. Well, it would enhance whatever is your strongest attribute. Be that strength, speed or mental acuity.'

'Are you serious?' Asked Tag, wide eyed. 'And it would work?'

'Oh yes,' assured the Prof.

'And it's safe?'

The professor shrugged. 'Define safe. There are elements of risk involved but I would say that it's safer than going into a fire-fight with a room full of vamps, and you've done that unscathed.'

'Why didn't you tell me this before?'

'I didn't know that the whole being human thing upset you so much. Actually, I'm still not sure why it does.'

'That's 'cause you ain't human, Prof. You're some sort of million year old super-intellect.'

'Not quite, but I get your point. Anyway, would you like to give it a bash?'

'Would I? Man, do turkeys hate Christmas? Of course I would.'

'Fine. Won't take more than a few hours to put together,' said the Prof. 'I'll need to take some blood.'

Tag was already rolling up his sleeve for the needle. 'Go for it.'

The Prof rummaged around in one of his trunks and came out with an old fashioned glass and steel needle and syringe that was attached to a large glass bottle.

'Whoa,' exclaimed Tag. 'Just how much blood do you need?'

'A rather substantial amount, I'm afraid,' admitted the Prof. 'Around two full pints.'

'Won't that kill me?'

The Prof shook his head. 'Shouldn't.' he said. 'A healthy male should be able to withstand the loss of up to thirty percent of their blood and still recover.'

'Why so much?'

The professor sighed. ‘Do you have a spare hundred and eighty years for me to explain?’

‘Of course not,’ replied Tag.

‘Well that’s how long to took me to get this right. So just accept the fact, I need a lot of blood, it needs to be fresh and it needs to be taken in one go.’

The Prof tied a tourniquet around Tags right bicep, swabbed his forearm with some alcohol and then slid the thick needle in. The big man grimaced.

The procedure took much longer that Tag expected. Initially the blood pumped into the reservoir but, after it got to half full, the feed slowed to a trickle and, by the end, it was a mere drip. By now, Tag’s heart was racing in an attempt to get enough blood through his system and sweat was pouring off him. His hearing had dulled and his eyesight had reduced to tunnel vision.

‘Go and lie down,’ advised the prof.

Tag nodded, stood up and immediately crashed to the floor like a felled tree. Slowly he rose onto all fours and crawled to the sofa in the corner of the room, climbed on and passed out.

***

When the big man awoke he could see that it was evening. The lights were on and the drapes drawn. Emily sat next to him, a look of concern on her face.

‘Hey,’ he mumbled.

‘Hey yourself,’ she replied. ‘Listen, Tag. I’ve been speaking to the Prof and to William. I don’t want you to go ahead with this potion thing.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s not that I don’t trust the Prof, it’s just that…’ Em shook her head. ‘To be honest, I’m not sure. It doesn’t seem right. You don’t know what’s actually going to happen. There could be side effects. You could even die.’

‘I could die every time we hit a vamp den,’ pointed out Tag. ‘At least this has an up-side. I could end up being super-strong.’

‘How do you know?’ Asked Em.

‘The Prof said that it would enhance my greatest attribute. Now I’m not a real deep thinking dude but even I know that my greatest attribute is strength. Well, it was until I met up with all you guys.’

The Prof walked over. He was holding a beaker full of a pale pink liquid. ‘You’re conscious,’ he stated.

‘Apparently,’ concurred Tag.

‘Here,’ the Prof handed the beaker to the big man. ‘It’s time. Drink it all.’

Tag took a suspicious sniff. ‘Smells like strawberry,’ he noted.

The Prof nodded. ‘That’s because it’s got loads of strawberries in it.’

‘Strawberries are magical?’

‘No, but they taste good. Now drink it.’

Tag put the beaker to his lips and drank the entire contents down in one long swig. ‘Tastes great,’ he said. ‘Now what?’

‘Now we wait,’ said the Prof. ‘Shouldn’t take long and something will start happening. Usually you start to feel a little warmth spreading through your body. Then a few twinges. Uncomfortable but not to worry.’

Tag nodded and they waited. And waited.

After twenty minutes Tag spoke. ‘Nothing’s happening.’

The Prof raised an eyebrow. ‘It would appear so.’

‘Hold on,’ interjected Tag. ‘Wait. I can feel something. Warmth.’ He held his stomach. ‘Actually, real hot,’ he grunted. Then he let out a yelp of pain. ‘Fire. Pain.’ The big man doubled over and grunted. Then he threw his head back and screamed in agony. Blood flowed from his nose and eyes and mouth and he pitched forward onto the floor.

‘What the hell is going on?’ Shouted Emily.

‘I don’t know,’ admitted the Prof. ‘This has never happened before.’

Tag started to fit, his teeth ground together, foam bubbled from his mouth and his arms and legs drummed spasmodically on the stone floor.

Em grabbed him and attempted to hold him still but even her Shadowhunter strength wasn’t enough and the big man thrashed around like a beached fish, smashing furniture and lab equipment.

The door burst open and William rushed in to help. Between him and Emily they managed to stop Tag hurting himself even more but the fitting continued.

‘Do something,’ yelled William at the Prof.

But the old man shook his head. ‘What?’ he asked. ‘There is no precedent for this.’

Again a cry of absolute agony tore from Tag’s throat and then, with a final spasm, he went still.

William knelt over him and put his ear to the big man’s chest. Then he felt for a pulse.

Finally he shook his head.

‘I’m sorry, Em,’ he said. ‘He’s gone.’

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Chapter 13

Lord Byron stared at his new chief Enforcer with an expression that might have been anger. Or hatred. Or a combination of the two. But when he spoke his voice betrayed little emotion. He was cold as death.

'You are failing us,' he said to Nathan. 'Three clubs in London. Two in Edinburgh. Two in Manchester and one in Exeter. One hundred and seven of our Brethren have been dealt the true death. Not since the Second World War have we ever experienced such a decimation of our numbers. And you, as head Enforcer, are responsible.'

Nathan said nothing, he simply returned Lord Byron's gaze. But instead of anger and hatred his expression was almost benign. A father witnessing a temper tantrum of his beloved son.

'What are you going to do about this?' Demanded Byron.

Still Nathan said nothing.

'Answer me, damn it. What are we to do?' Yelled the lord. 'The attacks are random; they take place all over the country. We cannot put every club on high alert and we cannot close them down.'

Finally the ex-Shadowhunter spoke. 'We have to close them down,' he said. His voice calm. Reasonable, as opposed to Byron's angry shouting.

'Don't be moronic,' spluttered Byron. 'How else do we feed? This is the way it has worked since the 1920's. We need the clubs. We need to be able to access a constant supply of blood. Of familiars. Of new material.'

Nathan shook his head. 'We do not need the clubs,' he contradicted. 'They're a mere convenience. They have become our fast food takeaways. Our MacDonald's. We have lost our need to hunt. We are no longer feared as the children of the night,' he continued. 'Instead people think of us as the romantic lead in the next soppy teenage love story. Twilight or True Blood. We do not inspire dread like the *Nosferatu* in the days of yore. Now we are mere night time fables and heroes of pulp-literature. It is time that we claimed the night once more. It is time that we took to the streets and hunted for our food. It is time to remind the humans why they are scared of the dark. No more clubs. We are *Nosferatu*.'

Lord Byron started to shake with rage. 'How dare you,' he hissed. 'How dare you talk about the *Nosferatu* of old, you mere stripling. You are but a child. You talk of things that you know nothing about.'

'I might be a child in your eyes,' admitted Nathan. 'But I have been

around for over a century and I have seen the moral decline of your house. You have become the equivalent of Nero, fiddling while your house burns down around you. Fear not though, my lord,' continued the ex-Shadowhunter. 'My Bloodwraiths and I will bring these wolves to justice, you can count on that. However, as head Enforcer, I demand that the clubs are closed. I demand that word be put out to all of the brethren – from this day on we hunt to feed. From this day, we assert our right to the dark. No longer do we lurk in the shadows. It is our time. The time of the *Nosferatu*. Now, if you do not mind, my lord,' ended Nathan. 'I need to speak to my Bloodwraiths. We have much work to do.'

The new-formed vampire left the room, closing the door behind him, leaving lord Byron alone with his anger.

The head of the United Kingdom chapter ground his teeth together in frustration. He had effectively been outplayed by his own creation. He remembered full well when he had warned his ex-enforcer, Cromwell, to beware the obvious ambition of Nathan Tremblay. And he remembered Cromwell's return warning.

But he had seen the warning as little more than a josh. A light joke, almost condescending. Now the junior *Nosferatu* was a *Caporegime* who had the direct ear of the master of all masters, he was head of the United Kingdom Enforcers as well as being unbelievably physically powerful. And to top all of that, he had his own elite force under him. A force of twenty highly trained Enforcers that answered directly to him.

However, Lord Byron had been around for a very long time and he too knew how to play the game of thrones. He would bide his time. He would wait. For patience is oft rewarded in situations like these. Many a time has burning ambition been doused by the waters of its own greed and self-importance.

His time would come.

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Chapter 14

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the wolf from growling with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Tears ran unstopped down Emily Hawks' cheeks. She stroked the big man's brow and whispered words of meaningless consolation as she wept.

Both William and the Prof stood by.

Silent.

Eventually Em looked up at the Prof. 'You did this,' she stated. 'You killed him.'

Professor Brownstone didn't deny it. But he did shake his head. 'I am truly sorry,' he said.

'Oh shut up,' shouted Em. 'Your apology is meaningless. I don't care what you say, he's dead because of you. All he wanted was to be useful. All he wanted to be treated with a little respect. And now he's dead. You gave him a mug of poison and you killed him.'

Em stood up and the Prof shrank back.

William stepped forward. 'Em,' he said quietly. 'Calm down. The Prof is just as devastated as you are.'

Emily shook her head. 'No he's not,' she said. 'Or you. Or anybody else. He was my friend. He would have died for me. All that he wanted to do was protect me. And I let you kill him.'

'Go,' said William to the Prof. 'Outside. Em needs some time alone.' He turned to Em. 'We'll be outside. If you need me, call.' He left the room and closed the door behind him, leaving Emily alone with the body of her friend.

She sat next to him. Bereft and at a loss as what to do next. Silent tears trickled down her cheeks as the last couple of months ran through her memory. Only just turned eighteen and she had killed countless vampires. And people. Humans. She had made and lost more friends than she had ever had before and she missed her foster parents with an ache that was physical. What she would have given for Bart's gruff advice. And Ryoko's warmth and understanding. She yearned for the daily routine and boredom of her past life.

The life she had before everybody started killing everybody else. Before the smell of blood and cordite. Before the constant stench of

death and the divine madness of battle. She wanted to be a normal eighteen year old. Taking selfies for her facebook page, instagram, snapchat. Illegally downloading music and worrying about boys.

As opposed to being a lethal killing machine who seemed to bring death and harm to all that she touched. The tears flowed faster as the enormity of what her short life had become come crashing down on her. She felt utterly helpless. Depressed beyond measure.

And utterly alone.

'Hey, baby girl. What you cryin' so much about?'

Emily hiccoughed in shock. 'I'm crying because you're dead,' she answered.

'I feel like I should be dead,' returned Tag. 'Feel like crap on a plate. But I think that dead men don't talk.'

Em burst out laughing and threw her arms around the big man as he sat up.

'Hey,' exclaimed. 'What's going on? Why you think I'm a dead man?'

'Because you were,' said Em. 'Stone cold as a man after two doctors have seen him.'

Tag frowned. 'I took the potion, didn't I?'

Em nodded.

'So that means that I must be super-strong. Though I don't feel it,' admitted Tag. 'Actually, I feel weak as a baby. Like I got the mother of all hangovers.'

'Lie back,' advised Em. 'Rest some more. After all, you are recovering from a case of death.'

'Enough about the death thing already,' snapped Tag. 'You obviously made a mistake. People don't die and then come back to life. Well, not human people at any rate. Whatever, I'm keen to test out my new powers so give me a hand.'

The big man stood up and Em helped him to the door. But by the time that he had walked a few steps under his own steam he appeared to be feeling better. He opened the door and they walked out, heading for the entrance and the garden.

The exited the house to find the Prof and William standing there. The Prof was smoking like a steam engine, a large Sherlock Homes style pipe clenched between his teeth.

Both of them stared at Tag with amazement.

'You're not dead,' exclaimed William.

'It would seem not,' concurred Tag.

The Prof let out a short barking laugh. 'Ha,' he said. 'Told you that I didn't kill him.'

'No you didn't,' said Emily, her voice as cold as ice. 'You merely said that were sorry. Different.'

'How do you feel?' Asked the Prof, undeterred by Em's hostility.

‘Like shit,’ admitted Tag. He pointed at a tree stump that stuck out of the turf some twenty yards away. ‘I think that I’ll rip that out of the ground,’ he said. ‘Try out my new super-strength.’

The big man walked over to the stump, squatted down and put his arms around it, then stood up. Unfortunately the stump stayed where it as. ‘Hard to grab,’ concluded Tag. ‘I’ll lift that car up.’ He walked quickly over to the Landrover, grabbed the back fender and stood up. Or, to be more accurate he attempted to stand up. To no avail. ‘I can’t understand it,’ he said in a puzzled voice. ‘If anything I feel weaker. Used to be I could actually shift a car when I tried. Why hasn’t it worked?’

‘How do you know that it hasn’t?’ Asked the Prof. ‘Maybe your greatest aptitude was speed. Try.’

Tag nodded, bent one knee in the classic sprinters pose and then ran. It was like watching a buffalo doing the one hundred. Big and lumbering and deadly looking. But certainly not The Flash.

The big man stopped and then stared into the distance. ‘Well, it’s not eyesight because I can’t see any further than I did before.’ His shoulders dropped, He looked defeated. ‘It didn’t work,’ he said.

The Prof didn’t say anything, instead concentrating on stocking his pipe up some more.

‘At least you’re alive,’ said Em. ‘And that’s the most important thing.’

‘Not to me,’ said Tag in a whisper. ‘Not to me.’

And he turned and trudged back to the house.

A man who had just cheated death.

For no reason at all.

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Chapter 15

Reg ‘The Savage’ Parsons didn’t normally drink. His strict training regime didn’t allow for it. But tonight he had made an exception and toasted to his success. One beer. No more. But he didn’t feel guilty. After all, it’s not every night that a man makes it into the top three of the official UK MMA rankings. Officially the third baddest mixed martial arts fighter in the Kingdom

R. Parsons. No. 3 - Heavyweight Division.

Man that felt good.

Then he had bid goodnight to his coach, his manger, his agent and his sparring partners and headed home. They would continue to drink. To celebrate. Like it was their victory as much as his. And Reg had to admit, in a way it was. They were always there for him. They had helped him with his drug problem, kept him on the straight and narrow and now they were all reaping the rewards.

His agent had assured him that once you cracked the top three, the offers would start to pour in. And, after his twenty percent, his managers cut, his coaches salary and the wages of his sparring partners, there would still be a substantial amount left over for Reg.

In actual fact, Reg couldn’t care less about the money. It was the fighting that he liked.

Inflicting pain. Smashing someone else into unconsciousness.

And the blood. Oh man how he loved the blood. The color. The smell. The viscous consistency.

He took his keys out of his pocket and pressed the remote, bleeping the doors open. But before he could climb in a man seemed to literally appear beside him. Reg jerked with surprise. It was unlike him to allow someone to sneak up on him but this man had done it with ease.

‘Reg Parson?’ The stranger asked.

Reg nodded. Wary. He was afraid of no man but this pale faced stranger who had appeared so silently gave him the creeps. There was something about him.

‘The MMA Champion?’ The man continued to ask.

Reg relaxed slightly, realizing that this must just be a fan. Nothing to worry about. An autograph hunter. Or someone who wanted a selfie with him.

‘Yeah,’ concurred Reg. ‘So what you want?’ He asked. ‘A selfie? A signature?’

‘No, mister Parson,’ replied the pale man. ‘Actually, it is I who would

like to do you a favor.'

'Oh, yeah? How,' asked Reg, his wariness returning full force.

'It's simple, Reg. I would like to give you the gift of everlasting life. Of course, that would mean that first, obviously, I shall need to kill you.'

Reg moved away from the car, giving himself some room to move. He quickly scanned the stranger and noted that he wasn't carrying a weapon. No knife, no club. Nothing.

Reg grinned. 'Man,' he said. 'You have just made a terminal mistake, my friend.'

The man smiled and, for the first time, Reg noticed his two inch long fangs. 'Oh, Reg,' he said. 'I am not yet your friend. But do not fear. I soon will be.'

'Stuff that,' shouted Reg and he let fly with a blisteringly fast combination of kicks and punches.

Not one landed. Wherever the martial arts champion punched there was just empty air. The pale stranger with the long teeth was simply not there.

Reg launched another attack. But it was as if he was moving in slow motion.

Then the stranger smiled. 'My turn.'

His speed was beyond comprehension. Reg felt the blows land. Not as single deliveries but as one continuous roll of pain. He heard his ribs snap, his arm shatter. He felt his eye burst in its socket. The pain was unbelievable. Never before had he felt such a crashing tsunami of agony.

He fell to his knees but the stranger grabbed his hair and pulled him back to his feet.

Then he held his face close and licked the blood from his cheek.

'Don't fret, champion,' he whispered. 'You will thank me for this after the change. You see, you have been chosen. Congratulations.'

And he opened his mouth wide and tore into Reginald Parson's neck like a pit-bull savaging a child. Grunting and snuffling as he did so.

***

Molly hiccoughed, burped and threw up. Behind her, both Clare and Jessica laughed out loud.

'Better out than in,' screeched Jessica.

The three of them were wearing matching outfits. Pink Dr Marten's boots, pink tights, pink leotards and pink frilly tutus. And to be honest they didn't really have the figures for it. In fact they looked like a trio of pink wobbly servings of blancmange.

It was Molly's hen night and, in tried and true tradition, her and her two friends had gone out on the town to drink industrial quantities of

alcohol, taking full advantage of Liverpool's standard bar practice of all night long happy hour and two for one drinks.

'Oh hell,' mumbled Clare. 'Coppers coming. Come on.' She grabbed Molly by the arm and started to drag her off the main road and into a dark alleyway. 'Come on, Jessica, you slag,' she slurred. 'Give us a hand. Before the police ruin our night.'

The three girls stumbled and staggered into the darkness, shrinking away from the two man police patrol as they plodded past.

'Having fun, girls,' said someone from behind them.

They all turned to see a pale faced man dressed all in black. His eyes glinted strangely in the dark. Backlit opals. Milky-blue and corpse-like. But there was no denying that, apart from the eyes, he was one seriously sexy man. Chiseled jaw, straight nose and full lips.

'Hey, alright, handsome,' purred Jessica. 'Fancy a bit, do you?'

All three girls laughed and the man smiled back.

'Mind if I join in?' Asked a female voice.

The girls spun to see a beautiful woman standing right next to them. Also all in black, her dark hair a tumble of silk down her back. Her figure, hour-glass perfection.

'How the hell did you get there, sweetheart?' Asked Jessica.

The woman simply raised an eyebrow.

'Anyway,' continued Jessica. 'No you can't join in. Shove off.'

'I wasn't asking you,' stated the woman. And she pulled back her lips to expose a set of two inch long fangs.

The three girls took a step back.

'What the…?'

'Of course you can,' said the pale man. 'More than enough for two.'

And the vampires fell on the girls like a pair of ravening animals, grunting and gnarring with pleasure as they satiated their unholy thirst for blood.

The children of the night were hunting once more.

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Chapter 16

‘I have just received word from Alpha Lucas in London,’ said William. ‘The vamps seem to have closed the clubs down. They’ve questioned a raft of familiar wannabees and all of them claim that the vampire scene is dead. No pun intended I’m sure. I must admit, I didn’t see this happening as quickly as it did. I reckoned that we would be able to hit at least another six or eight clubs and gatherings before we shut them down.’

‘Well that’s good, isn’t it?’ Asked Tag. ‘I mean, no more vamp clubs, no more innocents getting eaten.’

William shook his head. ‘No. The leeches have to have blood. It’s their one imperative. Except now the only way that they can do it is to find it piecemeal.’

‘You mean that they’ll go out at night and hunt it down?’ Asked Em.

The Wolfman nodded. ‘From now on we’re going to see hundreds of vampires trawling the general population for blood. That hasn’t happened since before the 1st World War. And even then it was controlled. I fear that we may have simply thrown gasoline on the fire. Dammit,’ he growled. ‘How could I have been so stupid?’

‘It’s not a problem, boss,’ interjected Tag. ‘All that we have to do is find where they all live. Take them out big time.’

The Prof snorted. ‘We have searched for their den for many centuries now. Anyway, they won’t have one single den, more like a few chapters with one major house. But they guard the secret exceptionally well. Not only physically but also with magical wards, subterfuge and help from their dark gods.’

‘Well can’t you do something about the wards?’ Asked Emily. ‘Or are you too busy concocting poisons to kill off my friends?’ She finished, her voice icy.

The Prof looked suitably chastened and didn’t reply.

‘Okay,’ continued Tag, unabashed. ‘Then we just gotta hunt them down one by one. Whatever, it’s better than sitting around with our fingers up our asses doing nothing.’

‘We can’t simply send the teams out into the street looking for random vamps,’ argued William. ‘It’s inefficient.’

‘Less inefficient than doing bugger all,’ countered Tag. ‘At least there’s a chance of finding one. Or two. Who knows, sometimes a dude gets some luck flowing his way.’

William shrugged. ‘True. I’ll get hold of the brothers. Tell the

Purebloods to patrol in groups of three. The wolves can go it alone, they're more than a match one-on-one with a blood sucker. Even two to one, and I don't see the vamps going out in groups. The age old *modus operandi* is to hunt alone. Meanwhile, I'll put some thought into how we can streamline the process a little. Perhaps it's time to call on the Morrigan again. See if the old bitch will help us.'

'You don't like that old girl much,' noted Tag.

'She cares,' admitted William. 'But she's not to be trusted. I've made that mistake before. She has power, though, and plenty of it. It's merely a question of whether she is prepared to use it to help us.'

'Why wouldn't she?' Asked Em. 'After all, she hates the vamps as much as we do.'

William shook his head. 'She doesn't hate. That is a human emotion. It's a game to her, albeit a very serious one. And as for her power, it is a finite thing. She is not immortal, although to us she has such longevity that it is much the same thing, however, the more power she uses, the shorter her life span becomes. Her power comes at a cost and sometimes she is simply not prepared to pay that cost. She would rather others did. People like us. The pawns in her game.'

'Whatever,' said Tag. 'When do we start?'

'We don't,' answered William. 'We stay here. Teams Charlie through Foxtrot will patrol.'

The big man shook his head. 'Team Tag goes to London,' he stated. 'Team Tag can't sit on his ass while others hunt. It's not right. Also, no one knows the big smoke like I do. Chances are the vamps aren't going to go upmarket in their quest for blood. They're going to hit the vulnerable. Bottom feeders, homeless. The waifs and strays. And that's my world. I'll find some. And I'll kill them.'

William sighed. 'No, Tag,' he said. 'With all due respect. You don't want to go up, single handed, against a vampire at night. Even if you manage one then the next one will probably get you.'

'Maybe,' shrugged Tag. 'But at least I'll be doing something.'

'Anyway,' interjected Em. 'I'll be with him, so he won't be single handed.'

'And so will I,' added Bastian. 'It's time to do what I do and that is, fight the bad guys.'

'As will I,' stated Sylvian as he walked into the room. 'Sun's down,' he said by way of explanation. 'So I'm up.'

'I can't let you go,' said William to Em. 'The risk is too great.'

'Emily arched an eyebrow. 'You can't let me go?'

William nodded. 'Sorry, I can't.'

'Well I've got news for you, Sir-bloody-William of arrogant macho-moron-ness. You can't stop me. Who do you think that you are?'

William flushed with emotion. 'Please,' he said. 'I don't want you

hurt. I don't think that I could stand it.'

Emily walked over to the Wolfman and stroked his cheek. 'I've got Tag and Bastian and Sylvian with me. And, in case you've forgotten, I'm no pushover either.'

The Wolfman nodded. 'I'll join you as soon as I've contacted the Pack and spoken to the Morrigan. Unless you could wait. Just a couple of days.'

Em shook her head. 'We go as soon as. Tonight. Every hour of the night that we aren't out there could be another hour of death for a human. I'm a Shadowhunter. It's my job.'

The two Shadowhunters, the Bloodborn and Tag went to their rooms to pack what they needed. The Prof went back to his laboratory and William sat alone, concentrating. It didn't take him long to commune with his two Alphas and their Betas. He filled them in on the new plan and told them to get out there as soon as possible. Emily was right, every second spent not hunting vamps was another second in which a human could die. Or worse, be turned, thereby adding to the number of *Nosferatu* that would be arrayed against them.

In under an hour, Emily and her companions were gone, taking the Landrover to London.

William composed himself as he started the arduous process of calling on the Morrigan.

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Chapter 17

Troy hated his nicknames. Puppy, or Pups. But as the junior wolf he was stuck with them. And, in all fairness, it was normally said in a jocular fashion with no real harm intended. Even if he wanted to say something he couldn't. The Pack hierarchy was very strict and it would not do to circumvent it, even though he was pretty sure that he could take on most of the members of his Pack and win. More than pretty sure, actually, he was convinced.

When they sparred or fought, as they often did to maintain their edge, he found himself holding back so as not to offend older brothers, reining himself in.

He was always amazed at how slow they seemed to him. How clumsy and weak. At first he had thought that perhaps they were treating him with kid gloves due to his youth but two months previously he found that wasn't the case. He had got into a dominance tussle with Rufus Gray, Lucas' Beta, after he had transgressed some obscure Pack rule and the Beta set out to punish him. Charging him while in wolf form and pushing him onto his back.

Troy had reacted instinctually, instantly going wolf, his lupine body ripping through his human clothes as it grew, and he rolled the beta over, grabbing him by the throat. Rufus struggled and fought back but to Troy he felt like a child. Feeble and ineffectual.

Then Troy had realized what he was doing and he let Rufus recover and force him into submission. After the incident he had assumed an attitude of deference and, as far as he was concerned, no one had noticed. He had gotten away with it.

But then, just before he had been allocated to Echo team under the Beta, Rufus Gray, and they had left for Edinburgh, Lucas had called aside. He still vividly remembered the talk…

At first the Alpha had simply stared at him, his eyes boring into him until he felt so uncomfortable that he simply couldn't keep still and began fidgeting. Shuffling his feet and clenching his hands.

Finally Alpha Lucas had nodded. 'You fight well, young wolf,' he said.

Troy kept his eyes down. Submissive in front of his Alpha.

'There is no need to keep your talents a secret,' continued the Alpha. 'However, you lack discipline. And in the pack, youth is no excuse for indiscipline.'

‘I meant no disrespect, Pack leader,’ answered Troy.

‘I know,’ admitted Lucas. ‘If you had then you would have faced me. And trust me, young wolf. I do not roll over so easily. I shall put your indiscretion down to youthful exuberance. But if you transgress again then you will feel my teeth on your neck. Clear?’

Troy nodded. ‘Like crystal, Alpha.’

‘One more thing,’ added Lucas. ‘Against my better judgment I have instructed Beta Rufus to give you some responsibility when you are out in the field. I want you on point, making a few decisions. You want to fight, great, so be it. You’re going to the right place.’

And so, Troy, the puppy of the pack, found himself patrolling the backstreets of Edinburgh at night.

Alone.

Prowling.

Looking for blood suckers to kill.

The gray stone building around him glistened in the dark, painted by the thick mist that caressed them, running its cold, damp fingers over the rough stone and leaving tracks of shimmering moisture.

Street lamps buzzed and flickered, bathing the area in a sickly sodium-orange glow. People moved in and out of the fog, singles, small groups. Shapes more than figures.

Three men loomed out of the veil in front of the young Wolfman. He had seen them well before they had noticed them, and he had smelled them even before that. They were tough. Working class. Slightly drunk but not so much as to be *non compos mentis*. Only drunk enough to be aggressive. Especially to a single adversary. A young man walking alone.

Troy stepped to one side, not looking for unnecessary confrontation.

The men stepped with him.

Troy moved again.

As did they.

‘Hey look, Oliver,’ quipped the one. ‘Looks like the fella wants to dance.’

Raucous laughter accompanied the sledgehammer wit.

‘That right?’ Asked the one called Oliver. ‘You want to get physical?’

Troy didn’t have time for this. He didn’t move forward or assume an aggressive stance. Neither did he move away. He simply looked directly at Oliver and growled.

It was a sound that could not be issued from a human throat.

Oliver blanched and took a hurried step back, as did his cronies.

‘Stuff this,’ he said. ‘Bloody weirdo. Leave him be. Let’s walk into town, this place is full of nutters tonight,’ he continued. ‘First the pale dude with the teeth and now dog-boy.’

Troy’s arm flashed out with lightning speed. A black-mamba striking.

He grabbed Oliver's arm, squeezing hard enough to make the bones creak.

Oliver let out a yelp of pain.

'What pale dude?' Asked Troy, his voice a deep rumbling continuation of the previous growl.

'Nothing,' answered Oliver. 'Just some guy with white makeup on and fake fangs. You know. Dracula. Down there,' he pointed at a side alleyway.

Troy dropped his arm and ran, moving at such speed that it literally seemed as if he had simply disappeared into thin air.

Oliver and his cohorts looked at each other then turned and ran in the opposite direction.

As Troy moved he sniffed the air. Straining out the smells of the city. Cars, food, garbage, humans. He let his nose lead him.

There. He paused. That unmistakable odor.

Because vampires subsisted on blood they developed a unique smell. The strict protein-only diet left their breath smelling of ketones. A top-note of nail-polish remover. Acetone. Under that a bass note of rotten meat. Almost undetectable. But not to a werewolf.

Then he heard it. A low whimpering sound. The type of noise one makes in a nightmare. It was the sound of a young woman in absolute terror.

Ahead. In the mist. Maybe sixty feet away.

Troy did a quick check about him and saw that no one else was close. Then he kicked off his trainers, tore off his shirt and dragged his jeans down, bundling them up and throwing them behind a skip.

As he ran towards the sound, he changed. A smooth metamorphosis from man to wolf,

A wolf over three times the size of any actual wolf.

The blood sucker was playing with the girl. He had torn her blouse, exposing her bare breasts and neck. A trickle of blood ran down her neck, not from a bite but from a deep cut made by the vamps talons.

He looked up at the last microsecond, dropped the girl and moved to his right. But Troy-wolf tracked his movement, latched onto his wrist and crunched down with his powerful jaws.

The sound of shattering bone crackled in the night air but Troy knew that the vamp would heal within seconds. It was little more than an inconvenience.

The vamp slashed down with his talons, aiming for the back of Troy's neck but the wolf released his grip on the vamps wrist and he rolled away.

Then Troy sprang to one side before whipping around and latching on to the back of the blood suckers left knee. Again, jaws clamped down and bone shattered.

The vamp grunted in pain as he struck out again.

But Troy was simply too quick. Preternaturally so. Even for a werewolf.

Jaws snapped together again and again and, within seconds, the vamp slipped on his own blood and fell to the floor. Troy leapt onto him, closed his massive jaws around his neck and pulled.

The dismembered head rolled into the gutter.

The vampire's victim was still on the pavement, sitting down, her knees pulled to her chest, her hands clutching her torn blouse together. Eyes as wide as saucers.

Troy approached her slowly and she shrank back, whimpering in terror.

But he cocked his head to one side and whined like a dog, consoling her.

Then he walked slowly up to, licked the blood from her neck and nuzzled her shoulder.

Hesitantly, she held out her hand and stroked him.

He pushed back and then, with his nose, nudged her to her feet. When she was standing he pushed her gently until she left the scene, walking back towards the town. Towards the light.

Just before she disappeared into the mist she turned to face Troy-wolf.

'Thank you,' she breathed.

And then she ran.

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Chapter 18

Emily, Tag, Bastian and the Bloodborn Sylvian had been in London for three nights.

Three nights of Tag leading them around the seedier side of London. Areas where the homeless, hookers and drug dealers abound. As did trash and human waste. The stench was almost as awful as the all pervading feeling of despair and disenfranchisement that seemed to exude from the human detritus that inhabited the areas.

Three nights of frustration.

But on the forth night Sylvian suddenly cocked his head to one side.

'They're here,' he said, pointing at a derelict warehouse at the end of an alleyway. 'I can sense more than one,' he continued. 'In the building. I think.'

'Right,' said Em. 'Bastian, you go around the back. Enter from there. Sylvian and I will go in through the front entrance. Tag, stay here. Keep a look out.'

'No,' reacted the big man. 'I think I come with.'

'Stay here, Tag,' repeated Emily.

'I don't need protecting,' he answered. 'What I need is to be involved. To fight.'

Em shook her head. 'What you need is to stay where I told you.'

Tag pouted like a sulky child and, just for a moment, Em thought that he was going to stamp his feet and throw a tantrum. But instead he nodded and stood where he was.

Bastian moved away and Em and Sylvian waited for a minute, allowing him time to get to the back of the building. Then they entered, pushing open the unlocked front warehouse door. Moving slowly and carefully to keep noise to a minimum.

Sylvian pointed ahead. 'At the back,' he whispered. 'To the left.'

The two of them ghosted across the vast open warehouse floor, illuminated every few steps by the bars of moonlight and neon that shone through the filthy windows.

They heard them before they saw them. Behind a pile of old wooden pallets. A grunting, sucking sound. In the background the low resonance of a human voice, keening softly in terror as they were exposed to the reality of the nightmare that we all think does not exist.

The unmistakable sound of vampires feeding.

Emily went from careful walk to full-on sprint in an instant, drawing

her katana as she did. Sylvian ghosted along behind her, his rapier in his hand.

As Em ran around the pile of pallets she saw Bastian come into view, moving in from the back of the building.

There were four vamps and two humans, both females. By their attire it was obvious that the girls didn't hold down a nine-to-five office job. They were working girls and the street was their office. Fringe dwellers that wouldn't be missed when they didn't clock in the next day, or night. Perfect blood sucker fodder.

Emily had taken off two of the vampires heads before the second two even registered that anyone was there. With a backhand flick she dispatched the girl that they were feeding on, quashing her feelings of guilt as she knew that it was better for her to die than turn.

The next two vampires dropped their prey and turned their attention to the young Shadowhunter. One of the vamps drew a large heavy blade, more machete than knife while the other extended his talons to full length.

Both Bastian and Sylvian readied themselves for battle but it was to no avail.

Emily didn't even pause. Her katana prescribed a glittering silver arc in the darkness, striking both vamps in one fluid continuation of movement. Body parts flew as she cut into them again and again. Hands, arms, pieces of torso.

Finally Sylvian stepped in and dispatched them both, swiftly decapitating them with two speedy blows. Meanwhile, Bastian shot the other female victim in the head. Three rapid-fire, silenced shots that put her out of her misery.

Em turned on the Bloodborn. 'What did you do that for?' She shouted. 'I was taking care of them.'

'No,' disagreed Sylvian. 'You were torturing them. Slicing them onto pieces without dealing a killing blow.'

'So?'

The Bloodborn shook his head. 'That way lies madness, my dear Emily,' he answered. 'We cannot allow that sort of feeling to control us. When we kill it must never be with passion. Or feeling. We must exterminate the threat as efficiently as we can, but we must never succumb to a feeling of joy when we do so.'

'Why?' Demanded Emily.

'Because it blurs the line,' continued the Bloodborn. 'The line between us and them. The line between decency and immorality. Trust me,' he finished. 'We must always guard against falling in love with the kill. Always.'

Emily didn't answer. Instead she cleaned her sword blade off on one of the fallen Vamps, sheathed it and started to walk back to the

entrance.

'Wait,' called out Sylvian. 'I can sense another of those vile creatures. Here Close.'

Em immediately drew her sword. 'Spread out,' she commanded. 'Let's find it and kill it.' She looked at Sylvian. 'Efficiently and without feeling.'

Sylvian nodded, ignoring her clumsy sarcasm and choosing instead to take her comment at face value.

The three of them checked the entire warehouse but to no avail.

'Come on,' said Em. 'There's no one here. Let's get moving.'

They all walked back towards the entrance.

***

Tag watched the two Shadowhunters and the Bloodborn head towards the warehouse. Towards battle. While he stood outside with his thumb up his ass and stayed safe.

He knew that Em was only trying to protect him. But he had fought against the vamps many times and, unlike all of his former gang mates, he was still alive. He felt that ought to count for something. Some sort of respect.

He sulkily kicked at an empty beer can that lay, crushed almost flat, on the sidewalk. A child sulking. 'Bloody think that they're so good with their superpowers and their immortality,' he mumbled to himself. 'At least I can go out in the sunlight. Stupid Bloodborn.'

The man appeared next to him like he had simply materialized out of the fog. A conjurors trick involving smoke and mirrors.

'Waiting for someone?' He asked.

Tag looked up, noting the death-pallor of the man's features, the unnatural redness of his lips and finally, as he smiled, the fangs.

The big man chuckled. 'Yes, actually,' he answered. 'I was waiting for you.' And with a speed and smoothness born of countless hours of practice, Tag drew his MP5 submachine gun from beneath his coat and opened up on the vampire.

The first three silver jacketed round smashed into the things chest driving it back a couple of steps and causing it to grunt in pain.

And then nothing. Tag glanced down to see the offending round jammed upright in the weapons ejection port. A smoke-stack jam, caused by the last fired cartridge not fully ejecting.

Frantically he worked the bolt but it wouldn't move. It was well and truly stuck solid. He dropped what was now simply a useless lump of steel and whipped out his combat knife. A WWII vintage, Fairbairn-Sykes SAS knife. He held it in his right hand and stood like a boxer, on the balls of his feet, ready to strike or defend.

But when the vampire moved Tag felt like he was trapped in gelatin.

Every movement was slow, slow, slow. A toddler taking their first steps. While the vampire was an Olympic sprinter in comparison.

Before Tag could bring his blade to bear the vamp had struck him twice in the face. Massive blows that broke bones and split skin. Then he grabbed Tag's arm, applied pressure and simply snapped it at the elbow, bending it back at and impossible angle and snatching the knife from his hand.

Finally, he spun the blade, rammed it into the big man's chest, withdrew it and then slashed open his throat, readying him for a feed.

But when he knelt next to the prostrate body, leaning forward to lap at the flowing blood, there was a flash of silver and his head leapt from his shoulders as Sylvian's rapier removed it with a single cut.

Emily kicked the vampire's body out of the way and dropped down next to Tag's lifeless corpse. With shaking hands she attempted to stop the blood pouring from the ragged wound in his throat. Pushing at the wounded flesh.

Bastian and the Bloodborn stood silently by, at a loss for words.

Eventually Sylvian spoke. 'It's no use, Em,' he said. 'There's nothing that you can do.'

Emily shook her head. 'No. Look, the bleedings stopping. See.'

'No,' denied Sylvian. 'He simply bled out, if you look you can see that his chest has stopped bleeding as well. There's just no blood left in him. No one can survive more than a minute with such grievous wounds. I'm really sorry. We all liked him very much.'

Em let her hand drop to her sides and a cry of absolute loss was torn from her throat. 'Not again,' she screamed. 'I can't take this.' She banged Tag's dead chest. 'No,' she cried. 'It's not fair.' She hit him again.

'Hey,' coughed Tag. 'Stop it. Why you punching me?'

Em, Sylvian and Bastian stared open mouthed at the big man who was struggling to sit up.

Tag looked down at his chest and then felt his throat. Em noticed that his arm was no longer bent backwards.

'Oh hell,' groaned the big man. 'I remember now, that blood sucker stabbed me with my own knife. Now that's embarrassing.' He glanced over at the headless vamp. 'Good, I see one of you got him for me. Who was it?'

Sylvian raised his hand.

'Thanks,' said Tag. 'Hey, why you guys all looking at me funny?'

We thought that you were dead,' whispered Em.

'Again? Man, you guys are determined that I pop my clogs. I'm fine. Couldn't have been as bad as it looked.'

'Your throat was cut,' said Bastian. 'And there was a big hole in your chest.'

Tag pulled his t-shirt up and looked, ‘There’s a big hole in my shirt,’ he admitted. ‘But my chest seems fine.’

Em started to laugh.

‘What’s so funny?’ Asked Tag

‘It’s your power,’ she said. ‘The Prof’s potion. It took your pig-headed stubbornness and refusal to give up and amplified it to the point that you can’t be killed. Tag,’ she continued. ‘I think that you have just become un-killable.’

Tag raised an eyebrow. ‘Really? Wow, cool.’

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Chapter 19

The vampires had changed their tactics and no one was sure what to do about it. Instead of feeding in any of the major cities, the blood suckers had spread their nets wider, picking random small villages and hamlets that were off the beaten track. From as far North as Lands End and as far South as Penzance.

England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales and even some of the Channel Islands like Alderney and Sark. There was no way the teams could patrol the entire landmass of the United Kingdom. And the feedings were so randomly placed that there was also no question of a chance interaction.

The wolves were stumped. As were Emily, Bastian and Sylvian.

So Em, Bastian, Tag and the Bloodborn had returned to William's hide out in the New Forest. The teams had stayed where they were, spread about the country, waiting for a call to arms. Waiting for some direction.

'You been hunting and killing these things your whole life,' said Em to Sylvian. 'How do you catch them?'

Sylvian did his French shrug. 'That's different. Time is on my side. I show patience, guile. Sometimes it takes me months, even years, to track down one or two of them. Sometimes I strike it lucky and come across a brood or small enclave. Mainly though it's just slow, grinding detective work. But we don't have time for that now,' he continued. 'We are at war and they are still out there killing on a daily basis while we sit here and contemplate our own navels.'

'True,' admitted Emily. 'I wonder if Tag or Bastian have any ideas.'

'Where are they?' Asked Sylvian.

'Tag is with the Prof. The old man is real excited about Tag's whole immortality thing. He's conducting experiments, trying to see how and why it happened.'

'And Bastian?'

'He's with William. The two of them are trying to keep some sort of lid on this whole affair. I mean, the cops are starting to notice a raft of sadistic and violent murders with a very similar MO. Not long now and they're going to reckon that they have the world's most prolific serial killer on their hands or, worse, a group of copy-cat killers.'

'So? What can William and Bastian do about that?'

'They've got contacts,' answered Em. 'Tons of them. Police, newspapers, priests, actors. People that owe them favors. People that

are in the know. A surprising amount of non-humans. Boggarts, wizards, godlings, that sort of thing. Basically, they're convincing them all to put about the theory that the killings are the results of two competing cults who have gone on the rampage. It's not the most feasible theory but it's probably more believable than the truth.'

Sylvian raised an eyebrow. 'I agree, modern humanity will pretty much believe anything before they accept that there is a war going on between vampires and werewolves.' He sighed. 'It doesn't seem that long ago when such a thing would have been almost common place. Oh well, a bit of damage control won't hurt. At least it will muddy the waters a bit.'

The door opened and William and Bastian walked in.

Bastian put the kettle on and William sat down. He looked exhausted.

'Wassup?' Asked Em.

'I think that Bastian and I managed to put a lid on things for a while. But there's some bad news. Lots, actually. Firstly, the Morrigan is ignoring me. I can sense her so I know that she's listening. But that is her way. She comes when not needed and stays away when you want her. Also, after talking with the police something has become very apparent.'

'What?'

'There has been a raft of disappearances. Missing persons across the United Kingdom. All very similar types. Mainly males in their mid twenties to thirties. Sporty, high achievers, loners. Aggressive or arrogant. Thrill seekers, extreme sports enthusiasts, fighters, that sort of thing. And when Bastian checked with Interpol they confirmed that the trend is taking place across Europe as well. After going through all of the available info we concluded that around four or five hundred have gone missing. The only reason that no one else has noticed is that it's taking place across such a mélange of countries.'

'So what does that mean?' Asked Em.

'William's theory is that the vamps are going on a recruitment drive,' interjected Bastian. 'And I agree. They're turning them, not feeding on them or we'd find the bodies. Strong, aggressive male types. Perfect vampire warriors. Even with the high rate of attrition they must have been successful with at least a couple of hundred. That negates all of the work that we have done so far. And more.'

Emily could see why the two men looked so exhausted. To them it seemed like there was no end. For every vamp that they killed another simply sprang up in its place. Or even another two. It was like playing whack-a-mole but with blood-sucking killers as opposed to furry toys.

'So what are we going to do about it?' Enquired Emily.

William shook his head. 'To be honest, I really don't have a clue at

the moment. Not a clue.’

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Chapter 20

Nathan had been called to a meeting in the main ballroom. There had been no warning and he was told by one of the elders to be there immediately.

'It is not your place to command me,' he said to Karl Jackson, the elder in point. 'Now leave my room, messenger. I shall arrive when I arrive. Go now.'

The elder stared at the young Shadowhunter/Vampire with hate and then, not wanting to push it too far, he left.

Nathan waited until the Elder had turned the corner in the corridor and then he ran at hyper speed to gather his Bloodwraiths. Collecting all twenty to accompany him to the surprise meeting.

They walked behind him. Not quiet militarily enough to be called a march but not relaxed enough to be simply walking. Their footsteps in time, arms swinging, eyes straight ahead.

Also, Nathan, unbeknown to the rest of the chapter, had kitted his Bloodwraiths out in a uniform over the last two days. Instead of the usual all-black, they now sported black shirts and trousers, leather boots, belts and jackets dyed a red so dark as to be the same color as congealed blood. Finally a short ceremonial dagger hung on each hip. The daggers were modern versions of the vicious curved bladed Arabian Janbiya, except, instead of the traditional Rhino horn handle, the Bloodwraiths handles were carved from human bone. Nathan had encouraged them all to grow their hair long and now it hung down to their shoulder blades.

It was impossible not to be impressed by them. And it took a very brave, or a very foolhardy being, to not feel a good deal of trepidation, if not fear, in their presence.

Nathan entered the ballroom, walked through the crowd of collective Elders to the center and stopped. Behind him his Bloodwraiths formed a row, peeling off the column in practiced symmetry.

Sitting on the throne at the head of the room was Janus Augusta, the supreme leader of the *Nosferatu*. He was dressed in black with a long maroon velvet cloak draped about his shoulders. A young familiar stood next to him. He was shirtless, his pale, adolescent body not yet encumbered by the full muscle mass of an adult. Nathan could see that the boy was bleeding from a small cut in his wrist. The blood dripped, slowly and unheeded onto the floor next to him. Janus Augusta had been snacking, playing with the child. A cat with a small

living thing. A cruel game as much as a meal.

Nathan strode towards the Master of all Masters, dropping to his knees before him and keeping his eyes downcast.

'Father,' he greeted. 'I was not told that you were coming. My joy at your presence is boundless and my heart is filled with its love for you.'

Janus cackled. 'You have no heart, Nathan Shadowhunter, but I thank you for the show of respect, it is an art that many of our brethren have forgotten. You knew not of my coming because the rules do not allow the accused to be forewarned. And right now, you, my child, stand before me as the accused.'

'Accused of what?' Asked Nathan.

'I shall let your accuser answer that,' said the *Capo*. 'Now stand, my child.'

Nathan stood as Lord Byron stepped forward.

'In front of the gathered chapters of the *Nosferatu*, I accuse you of gross negligence and dereliction of duty. I accuse you of incompetence, mismanagement and cowardice. And I demand that you be tried and sentenced.' Declaimed the Lord, his accusations ringing out across the huge room.

Nathan smiled, an expression of true amusement. 'So speaks the king of cowardice himself,' he replied. 'The Lord who is naught but a figurehead. Well, fire away, lord of timidity, lay out your case.'

'It does not take a genius to see your multitude of failings,' said Byron. 'Since taking command of the Enforcers you have failed to protect the brethren from the wolves. You have closed down the feeding clubs. You have loosed the brethren on the towns and cities like wild animals to feed at will. You have exposed us to great danger. And to what avail? Still the wolves hunt and kill us. Still we are not safe. And do we see you out patrolling to hunt them down? No. Cowardice.'

Once again Nathan smiled, this time condescendingly. 'My Lord Byron,' he said quietly. 'I put it to you that you are a liar. You are dealing in falsehood and part truths at best. It is true that I have closed down the clubs. We were far too exposed in them. The wolves could have, and indeed they did, strike at any club, anywhere in the United Kingdom at any time. We do not have the personnel to protect them all.

But then to say that I released our brethren into the night like a pack of wild animals…I find that statement to be both untrue and highly offensive. None of us are, or behave, as wild animals.

You then go on to say that the wolves still do us harm. Again, a monstrous lie. There have been no attacks for over three weeks now. Ever since I advised our brethren to cast their nets further afield. To feed in the hamlets and hollows. Outside of the major cities. And this

they do now with impunity. As we were always meant to do. We are the children of the night. Not some degenerate gathering of club-goers.

Not only this, I have encouraged our brethren to turn anyone whom they consider worthy. Athletes, fighters, top business men and women. People with drive and determination. They are not just feeding will-he-nil-he. We now hunt with a purpose. And since I have instituted this we have added many hundreds of brethren to our houses. Superior vampires, not merely the humans that managed to live through being fed on.

I have created order and drive. I have created purpose. I have put us back on the track that we had fallen off under your weak and spineless leadership. So, accuse all that you want. Because no one will support your baseless ravings. You pathetic creature.'

Lord Byron howled in rage as he stepped forward and lashed out at Nathan. The ex-Shadowhunter saw the blow coming like it was in slow motion but he did not deign to move. Instead allowing the lord to strike him full in the face. One of Byron's extended talons sliced Nathan's cheek to the bone and blood spurted out before the cut healed almost instantly leaving his cheek covered in blood.

Nathan looked at Byron with contempt but, before he could say anything, there was a collective gasp in the room full of elders.

Your blood,' said Janus. 'It shines with a light of inner fire.' The ancient vampire leader stood up and recited.

'When He broke the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, "Come." And a shining red horse went out; and to him who sat on it, it was granted to take peace from the earth, and that men would slay one another; and a great sword was given to him.'

Nathan frowned. 'The Bible. Revelations. I've heard it before but I don't get what that has to do with me.'

The *Capo* nodded. 'Of course,' he said. 'I always forget how young you are. It is part of our *Nosferatu* history. Part of the narration of our existence. It is prophesized that a man who is not a man will one day come to lead us into battle. And that man who is no man would be known by his shining red horse, or as our philosophers read it, by his shining blood. That being would wield the sword on behalf of the *Nosferatu* nation, enslaving all of human kind and placing us at our rightful place. At the acme of civilization. The apex predator amongst all others.'

Nathan still looked puzzled.

'You are the man who is not a man,' continued Janus. 'You are a Shadowhunter. And you are now an Enforcer, a leader of the Bloodwraiths. The soldiers. You see, we always took it that the glowing of blood part of the prophecy was not literal. Perhaps

meaning royalty, or such what. But now I know. Your blood literally glows with an inner fire. It is incredible.'

Nathan frowned. 'I can't actually see that. If just looks like blood.'

'But you would not gainsay all of us?' Asked Janus.

Nathan shook his head. 'No. If you say so, father, then so be it. But you are the leader of the *Nosferatu*. How could we countenance any other, regardless of any ancient prophecy?'

'Yes,' admitted Janus. 'But the prophecy did not say that you would become the leader of the *Nosferatu*, it said that you would lead us into battle. And already you have begun that. For the first time in countless years we once more roam the streets at night, bringing fear back into the hearts and minds of the humans. The food.'

'I only did what my heart led me to do, father,' said Nathan.

Janus chuckled. 'Again with the heart,' he said. 'Very droll.'

Nathan allowed himself a small smile before he spoke. 'But, father. What of my guilt? What of the accusation arrayed against me?'

'Groundless,' declared the *Capo di tutt'i capi* of the Federation. 'What lord Byron complains about are mere growing pains. And we are growing once again, make no mistake.'

'So I have been falsely accused?' Asked Nathan. 'In that case, what happens to my accuser?'

The *Capo* stared intently at Nathan as he thought. Finally he spoke. 'Nothing,' he stated. 'Lord Byron is the leader of your house. As such he is entitled to make whatever accusations that he finds necessary. It is his right. However,' continued the leader of leaders as he turned to face Lord Byron. 'The Americans have an expression, three strikes and you're out. I put it to you, Lord Byron, that you have had your two strikes. Tread carefully, as the next one will most definitely prove fatal to you.'

Byron bowed deeply, knowing that he had been beaten. 'Of course, my leader,' he replied. 'Your will is my command.'

'I have a request, father,' said Nathan.

The *Capo* nodded.

'I would like to increase the number of Bloodwraiths. Train more of our brethren to a level that will ensure our victory when the time comes.'

'How many, my child?'

'I would like to increase the number to one hundred,' answered the ex-Shadowhunter.

'Make it happen,' said the Capo. 'You can use any resources that you deem necessary. After all,' he finished. 'You, Nathan Tremblay, ex-Shadowhunter, are the Red Horse of War. You are our Revelation.'

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Chapter 21

Emily sipped at her cup of tea. No milk, sweetened slightly with honey. Tag was spending most of his spare time with Professor Brownstone so, thankfully, Em was able to make her own tea, allowing her to avoid the huge steaming mugs of over-sweetened milky beverage that the big man served up.

Bastian walked into the kitchen, grabbed a soda from the fridge and sat down opposite Em. 'Wassup, girl?' He asked.

'Same old,' answered Emily with a sigh.

'Bored?' Questioned the Jamaican.

Em shrugged.

'Depressed?' Continued Bastian.

'Maybe. No, not really.'

'Hey, it's okay to get depressed every now and then,' said Bastian. 'You have every right. Jeez, girl. You're eighteen years old. Fact is, you should be thinking about college. University. Boys and lipstick and crap like that. Not vampires and werewolves and how best to remove someone's head with a Japanese sword.'

Em laughed. 'Boy's aren't a problem,' she said. 'I think about them well enough.'

Bastian shook his head. 'I said boys. Not a thousand year old Wolfman. I mean, when is the last time you actually spoke to a boy? Or young man. Not someone who was at least a hundred years older than you.'

Em took another sip of her tea. 'I suppose that Troy is the only one.'

'Troy?'

'Yeah, the one they call Puppy.'

'Oh, him,' acknowledged Bastian. 'One of the wolves. Quiet. Dangerous. Yeah, I know him.'

'He's not dangerous,' argued Em. 'He's sweet and kind and thoughtful.'

'And dangerous,' repeated Bastian. 'I know, I've met the type before. But at least he's not a few hundred years older than you. So, yeah, he would count.'

'Anyhow,' said Emily. 'William says that physical age doesn't matter. He says that I have an old soul.'

'Well he would, wouldn't he,' quipped Bastian. 'He's about a thousand years older than you. If he didn't think like that how's he ever gonna seduce anyone. I mean, he's pretty much older than any

female on the planet.'

'It's not…what do you mean seduce?' Snapped Em. A tear rolled down her cheek and she dashed it away. 'Ah, damn. I'm sorry, don't know what I'm crying about. It's just that…well, William and I were… together. Sort of. And now he's all, like serious and grumpy and unaffectionate. I don't know what's going on. *He* asked *me* out, you know? Oh hell, I'm sorry.'

'Don't be silly,' said Bastian. 'Nothing to be sorry about…anyway, seduce was the wrong word…but you know what I mean.

Look, Em, it's a pack thing. He's under a lot of strain. I don't really get the whole Pack thing but I do know that he can't lead the pack and still be the William that you first met. It's all Omega and Alpha and Beta and dominance and crap like that. These wolf dudes are rough and tough and to lead them you gotta be rougher and tougher.

Look, I'm not sure how to explain. Not sure of I even understand it all myself. All I'm saying is, I got your back, Em. You need a friend, I'm here. I might be a century older than you, regardless of how ancient your soul may or may not be, but if you need to talk. Well, you know, I'm sure that I can lower my IQ enough to carry out a conversation,' he finished with a cheeky grin.

Em stuck her tongue out at him. 'Asshole.' Then she leaned across the table and took his hand. 'Thanks Bastian. I appreciate that. Really I do.'

He winked at her.

Before Em could say anything else the room started to pulse with a deep resonance and a bright white light began to coalesce in the corner. The light got brighter and brighter until they both had to shield their eyes with their hands.

Then with a loud pop the sound stopped, the light dimmed and a man appeared in its place. He looked around the room and smiled.

'Ambros,' shouted Em.

Both her and Bastian jumped up and ran over to the leader of the Shadowhunters. Bastian shook his hand and Em threw her arms around him and kissed him soundly on the cheek.

Finally the two of them stood back to give Ambros some room.

'Greetings, children,' he said. 'You have no idea how very pleased I am to see you both. Where is Nathan? I hear that he too survived.'

Bastian shook his head. 'He wasn't there that night that the vamps took the Foundation out. All we can assume is that he's gone into hiding. We haven't heard from him and he has no way of knowing that we're alive. The only thing that we can do is wait.'

Ambros nodded sadly.

'Oh, Ambros,' said Emily. 'It's so good to have you here. We thought that you were dead. It's been terrible.'

‘Well, not dead yet,’ answered the old man. ‘And I wonder if you could all call me Merlin now,’ he continued. ‘It is my given name and, all said and done, I do feel most comfortable with it.’

Em nodded. ‘Merlin. Yeah, I heard, The Old Morrigan told us. This just gets freakier and freakier.’

Merlin laughed. ‘Yes, I have to agree with that summation. Oh, by the way, it’s just The Morrigan. Not the *Old* Morrigan. I’d avoid that word if I were you. Morgan can get a little tetchy at times.’

Emily was about to answer when a gunshot rang out.

‘What the hell was that?’ Asked Merlin. ‘Are we under attack?’

Em sighed. ‘No. that’s just the Prof shooting Tag again. Some sort of experiment that they’re conducting.’

‘The Prof?’ Questioned Merlin.

‘Yes,’ confirmed Emil. ‘Professor Brownstone.’

Merlin shook his head. ‘That old Boggart. You chaps must be scraping the bottom of the proverbial barrel if you’ve recruited that nutter.’

‘I heard that, you charlatan,’ said the Prof as he walked into the room. ‘I demand an apology.’

‘No chance,’ snapped Merlin. ‘You snake oil salesman, you.’

‘Sideshow conjurer,’ returned the Prof.

‘Huckster,’ replied Merlin.

The two old men stared belligerently for a few seconds and then threw their arms around each other, hugging and patting their respective backs.

‘How long has it been?’ Asked the Prof.

‘Over four hundred years,’ answered Merlin. ‘Ye gods, I heard that you were dead.’

‘As I you.’

‘Oh well, obviously reports of our mutual demises were exaggerated,’ noted the magician.

The two of them continued laughing and, as they did so, William entered the room followed by Sylvian.

Merlin immediately stopped the show of jollity as his face registered a mixture of complete shock and surprise.

‘Ambros,’ said Emily. ‘Oh, sorry, I mean, Merlin. May I introduce Sir William and Sylvian Baptiste.’

‘Good lord,’ blurted Merlin. ‘Well I never, this has been a day for the resurrection of the dead,’ he said. ‘Emily, I had no idea that this was the Sir William that you knew. And as for you,’ he turned to the Frenchman. ‘Le grand duc de Bourgogne, Sylvian Baptiste, Ordre des chevaliers du Saint-Esprit.’

Sylvian bowed deeply. ‘Master Mage, as always it is an honor and a privilege to be in your presence. May I also add that I am overjoyed to see that the rumors of your death were both untimely and untrue.’

‘The Omega and the Bloodborn together once more,’ said Merlin. ‘This bodes very well for our quest.’

‘And now you are with us again,’ continued William.

The three men stood in a circle and Emily could feel the ages of history ripple from them, like a huge rock had been dropped into the lake of foreverness and caused a Tsunami. A tidal wave of shared loss and violence. Of war and forgiveness. Of hoped for peace and the divine madness of war. Countless years of personal sacrifice given to protect humanity against a single enemy.

And Emily felt humbled to be in their presence.

‘The Morrigan has filled me in,’ informed Merlin. ‘Looks like we have some problems.’

‘Aye,’ admitted William. ‘I’ve been trying to contact her but she’s been ignoring me, as usual.’

‘To be fair,’ commented Merlin. ‘That’s partly my fault. I was as close to death as one can be while still being alive and she was sacrificing some of her time to keep me going. Obviously this kept her somewhat occupied. But never fear, she’s actually on her way here now. Well, she was right behind me, but I tend to translocate instantaneously whereas she takes a little longer.’

As he spoke there was a flash of blue light and a massive crow appeared in the room, instantly morphing into the form of the Morrigan. But this was not the old lady that they had all seen previously. This time she was appearing as the seductress, Morgan la Fay.

As the beautiful woman solidified in front of them all, Tag walked into the room. His shirt was drenched in blood and he had a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth.

The Morrigan stared at him distastefully. ‘Why are you covered in blood?’ She asked.

‘The Prof shot me,’ answered Tag. ‘Hey, aren’t you the old crow lady? How you get to be so fine all of a sudden?’

La Fay shrugged, the movement pulling at her tight dress and making all manner of interesting things happen to the parts of her body underneath. ‘If someone shot you in the chest,’ she continued, genuinely intrigued, ‘then why aren’t you dead?’

‘Beats me,’ admitted Tag. ‘The Prof gave me some strawberry milkshake stuff with loads of my blood in it. I died, came back, died again. He gave me some more. Now it looks like whatever he does he can’t kill me. Pretty cool, accept it still hurts like buggery whenever he shoots me. Or stabs me. And that’s less than good.’ The Yardie looked at Merlin. ‘And who be you, old man?’

‘I be Merlin.’

‘The magician?’

‘I suppose so,’ said Merlin.

‘Man,’ noted Tag. ‘This place just gets freakier and freakier.’

‘Hey,’ exclaimed Emily. ‘That’s exactly what I just said.’

The Morrigan sighed. ‘Fine, enough idle chatter. Now listen, children. We have work to do. And Tag, flattering though it is, could you please tear you eyes off my cleavage for a while.’

‘I’ll try, mama,’ said the big man. ‘But, unlike all these other dudes here, I’m only human.’

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Chapter 22

Over the last couple of weeks Nathan had been on the road more than the band, The Grateful Dead. Travelling across the United Kingdom and much of Europe, seeking out brethren of a high enough caliber to become one of his Bloodwraiths.

While travelling, he had made full use of the *Nosferatu* private jet, a Gulfstream G650, as well as a fleet of blacked out limousines. All of the limousines were chauffeured by a team of trusted familiars who were fanatically loyal to the *Nosferatu* and ensured that the cars were always fully sealed against the sun and when they parked it was always in underground parking or areas that never saw any sunlight. Thus Nathan could work in the day as well as the night, covering literally thousands of miles in very little time.

The ex-Shadowhunter had marveled at both the extent and depth of power that a higher echelon *Nosferatu* yielded in the circles of authority and had to admit to himself that, even at the height of the Olympus Foundation, he had not wielded such influence and control. The knowledge was a heady aphrodisiac to him, finer that the best drugs and more addictive. But Nathan never came close to being satiated. In fact his lust for power began to grow at a rate that was exponential compared to the amount that he wielded.

Simply put, the more powerful he felt he was becoming, the more powerful he wanted to become.

During his recruitment drive, two brethren in particular had stood out to him. And surprisingly neither of them was an elder.

The first, a new aspirant by the name of Reginald Parson an ex-MMA cage fighter also known as The Savage. The man was quick, strong and possessed of a profound well of anger that burned so brightly that it was visible by merely looking into his eyes. Also, he seemed to develop an instant and deep worship for Nathan, like a pit-bull to a dog whisperer.

The second was an older man, an academic who had been turned in London. Doctor Parker Soames, a research fellow at the London University. And, although he was not possessed of as violent a bent as Reg, he was aggressive in his own way. The Doctor was an insistent experimenter and thinker. And already he had transformed much of the staid and accepted way that the brethren thought, suggesting many innovations that were contrary to the entrenched *Nosferatu* customs.

Now Nathan was back at his new headquarters. These were situated in an old forgotten manor house called Braithwaite Manor. The massive Regency building had fallen into complete disrepair after WWI when lord Braithwaite and his three sons had all died in the Battle of Passhendaele in France leaving the wife to destitution as the family fortune was eaten up by both death duties and profound mismanagement.

Sometime after WWII the Ministry of Defense had purchased it and turned it into an underground, state-of-the-art, Cold War bunker compete with operations rooms, living quarters, subterranean shooting ranges and water supply.

Unfortunately, showing a typical government lack of sufficient research and development, it was discovered that, while solid earth is a great barrier to the radiation thrown out by a nuclear explosion, chalk is not. And Braithwaite Manor was built entirely on the friable chalk soil of the county of Dover, as seen by the White Cliffs bearing the same name.

The newly finished but now useless bunker was sold, a little over a year later, to an eccentric billionaire who was actually a front for the *Nosferatu*.

Now it was the headquarters for Nathan Tremblay's Bloodwraiths. Perfectly suited for a species that would need to permanently stay out of the sunshine.

However, Nathan, under the suggestions of Doctor Parker Soames, was now instituting huge changes. The major one being that they had turned two of the vast dormitories into areas that they referred to as 'Feeding Pens'. Here they had strapped captive humans to small cots and in their left arms ran a combination of intravenous fluids including isotonic sodium chloride. This cocktail of liquids had been perfected by doctor Soames and was conducive to replacing the blood loss experienced by the humans during the harvesting process. This was when the cannula in the right arm was activated and blood was drained from their system into sterile plasma bags ready to be fed on by the Bloodwraiths.

The average human contains around twelve pints of blood. But by draining them on a regular basis and replenishing their fluids via transfusion Doctor Soames had discovered that a human would yield approximately twenty five pints of blood over a period of six weeks before they died of hypovolemic shock.

The average vampire does not need an excessive quantity of blood to survive, in fact most only hunted once every fortnight, consuming eight or so pints at a time. However, with Nathan's new harvesting regime, his Bloodwraiths were able to consume four times the average amount of blood and, as a result, they were actually growing faster,

stronger and more powerful. This had never been done before.

Unfortunately it also instilled a growing desire to consume more and more human blood. In short, the Bloodwraiths were addicted to human plasma like a crack user is addicted to smoking Hard Rock.

Nathan saw a future where all humans would be subjugated in this way. Breeding pens, feeding lots.

Humanity reduced to the level of cattle. Where they belonged.

The food.

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Chapter 23

‘Now that the Prof has perfected the potion that worked on Tag, why don’t we give it to the Purebloods?’ Asked Emily. ‘I mean, who knows what powers they could manifest? They’re already super fast and strong. Surely that would give us a huge advantage over the blood suckers.’

William shook his head. ‘The Profs potion won’t work on them,’ he informed. ‘They’re not human. Their blood makeup and abilities would simply reject the mixture.’

‘Okay,’ acknowledged Em. ‘Then why don’t we look to recruit some humans. I guarantee that there will be a lot of soldiers, mercenaries, believers, that would be keen. We dose them all up and, Bam, more super-beings. Come on, guys,’ she continued. ‘Let’s do that.’

Neither William nor the Prof answered. Tag shrugged, as did Bastian. Sylvian was not yet there as it was still mid morning.

Emily clapped her hands together. ‘Wake up, guys,’ she insisted. ‘It’s a good idea. Well, at least it has enough merit to discuss. So, what do you think?’

Finally William turned to face the Prof. ‘Tell her,’ he said.

‘Well, it’s not all that simple,’ he began. ‘Results can vary *vis-a-vis* the set of parameters imposed on the…umm…the structure, as it were. You know, er…race, body type, that sort of thing.’

Emily looked blank.

‘Tell her,’ insisted William.

‘It’s very risky,’ said the Prof.

‘Yes, I know,’ acknowledged Em. ‘You told Tag that there was even a slight chance that he might die. But men who join the army face the same risks. I am sure that we could find a bunch of volunteers. Well paid volunteers, who would be willing to take a small risk to help save the world and earn some hard cash.’

The Prof took out his pipe and began to fill it. ‘Perhaps I may not have stressed the chance of dying enough,’ he admitted. ‘You see, there is, in fact, quite a high chance of death. Yes,’ he continued. ‘Very high, actually.’

‘Prof, stop pissing around,’ growled William. ‘The truth.’

‘Okay,’ snapped the Prof. ‘Tag is actually the only one who has ever lived. The others were close but no cigar. There, now you know. Tag is unique.’

Emily stared at the Prof, her eyes blazing with anger. ‘No cigar?

People die and all they get from you is a Tough Luck and No Cigar?'

She strode up to the Professor, lined him up and slapped him hard enough to drop him to his knees.

The Prof stood up and, instead of cowering back like Em expected, he grew to about eight foot tall, swelling in both height and bulk. Then he threw back his head and roared.

Unperturbed, Emily simply kicked him in the knee, swept his feet out from under him and punched him in the face. Hard.

The Boggart Professor instantly shrank to around four foot and he sat on the floor like a child

'What the hell is wrong with you? Bumhole,' shouted Em. 'You risked killing my friend. One of the very few that I have left. Why?'

The Prof looked baffled. 'I needed to see if the potion worked. I had made some adjustments and I was fairly confident. Plus he kept asking.'

'So you told him that everyone who had ever tried it had died?'

'No,' said the Prof. 'Not as such.'

Emily raised her hand to slap him again but before she could William stopped her.

'No, Em,' he said. 'Look at him. He genuinely does not understand the problem. As I told you, he is a Boggart. And pretty much their entire reason for living is to accumulate knowledge. They are both the bearers and the discoverers of all knowledge in the other-worlds. To him, another fact learned is worth a hundred lives. He's not callous or psychotic, it's simply their way. He means no harm and, luckily, it's all worked out for the best. But you can see why we can't use the potion.'

'It's all worked out the best for us,' snapped Em. But what about all the other people that he murdered under the auspices of collecting knowledge. Bloody Nazi,' she spat.

'That was all very long ago,' said William. 'Many hundreds of years. Things were different then.'

At that stage both Merlin and the Morrigan walked in.

'What's going on?' Asked Merlin.

William explained. 'You see,' he continued. 'We simply don't have enough boots on the ground to patrol everywhere. We need to be able to track down a few dens. Hit them where they live.'

'It can be done,' said Merlin. 'But it's not easy and I would need a living blood sucker to do it. Even then, the tracking spell would only lead us to his, or her, specific den. Might only be a couple of them there, might be ten or twenty. It's a bit of a crap shoot.'

'Better than nothing,' replied William. 'But I'm not sure how to even find one. Sylvian has been doing it for years now but even he says that sometimes he hunted continually for over ten years before he came

across a vamp or two. It's just that he's been doing it for so long that he's accumulated such a high kill-count.'

'What about birds?' Asked Tag.

Everyone turned to look at the big man.

'I'm sorry?' questioned the Morrigan.

'I thought that, you know, because you're sorta a crow, sometimes,' replied Tag. 'Maybe you had some kind of power over birds and stuff. Could you ask them to look out for the vamps?'

The Morrigan smiled. 'That's not an altogether stupid question,' she said to Tag. 'And yes, I do have power over our feathered friends. Unfortunately it won't help much.'

'Why?' Asked Tag.

'I love them,' continued the Morrigan. 'But birds aren't the brightest of creatures. A sparrow's brain weighs less than three hundreds of an ounce. That's around two thousand times smaller than a human's. They understand the most basic of emotions and inputs. Danger, hunger, the need to breed. That's about it. I could place them as sentries outside and they would warn of anything approaching but that would be their limit.'

Tag frowned. 'Well then there's nothing left but to do random patrols and hope for the best,' he said.

'What about the gargoyles?' Blurted out the Prof.

There was a long pause while no one spoke.

'Gargoyles?' Asked Em.

'Yes, gargoyles,' repeated the Prof coldly as he remembered the punch. 'I'm sure that even you know what those are.'

'Well, yes,' said Em. 'I know the accepted definition. A grotesque carved human or animal face or figure projecting from the gutter of a building, typically acting as a spout to carry water clear of a wall but sometimes merely for decorative purposes.'

The Prof raised an eyebrow. 'Good definition,' he admitted. 'Incorrect, as usual, but still an acceptable attempt.'

'The gargoyles are no more,' said William.

'Rubbish,' snapped the professor. 'I see them everywhere.'

'I must admit,' added Em. 'The Prof is right. I mean, they weren't big in Alaska but in London and Cambridge they were pretty thick on the ground. Well, roof. And not only on churches but on all sorts of buildings.'

Those are just gargoyles,' said William by way of explanation.

'Oh, oh,' said Tag wearily. 'I suspect that this is another one of those freakier and freakier things coming up.'

Merlin grinned at the big man's discomfort. 'You are correct,' he said. 'The gargoyles that we are talking about look just like the ones that Em has seen, except that they are sentient beings. They aren't living

creatures *per se*, instead they have been magically imbued with life-traits. It was done during the dark ages when they were placed on holy places and important buildings as watchdogs or sentries.

They had a mental link with their owner, or keeper or maker. Most often a mage of some standing however the link could be transferred, for example, if a wealthy merchant desired one or such what. Specifically they mentally called out whenever they saw vampires, demons, ghouls that sort of thing. They were ostensibly sentries against evil. They would call and we would come. Worked well. No one suspected as most of the gargoyles were genuinely simply stone statues. So they hid out in the open.'

'Well they seem perfect,' said Em.

Merlin shook his head. 'The secret didn't last and, once out, most of them were destroyed. They're seriously hard to kill but the problem is that they are so slow, being made of stone after all, they don't bend so well, so moving, climbing etcetera takes place but all in ultra slow motion. Mainly they like to sit still and strain rainwater through their heads for sustenance while they simply keep a watch for vamps. To the best of my knowledge, there aren't any left.'

'Are so,' insisted the Prof in a sulky voice.

'Where?' Questioned William.

'Saw some in Cambridge. At the university.'

'When?' Insisted William.

The Prof looked sheepish. 'Actually, not that sure, to be honest. This century, I think.'

Merlin shook his head. 'I very much doubt it,' he said. 'However, if there is any chance then we should check it out. Tag, will you go?'

'Sure thing, magic-man.'

'I'll go with him,' said Em.

'Count me in,' added Bastian.

Merlin nodded his approval. 'Good. To our tasks then.'

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Chapter 24

The three friends started at the Prof's residence in the gate tower at Cambridge. They waited until night fall and then climbed a winding staircase that led to the roof, opening out onto a small level area surrounded by crenellations. The leaded roof swept upwards from there to the first pinnacle and a row of gargoyles.

'Well I suppose that we should just walk around on the roof for a while and take a closer look at the gargoyles,' said Em.

'Yeah,' agreed Tag. 'See if we can engage one in a conversation.'

Bastian laughed. 'Definitely a phrase that I thought that I'd never hear,' he said. 'Let's try to engage a gargoyle in a conversation.'

They clambered up the steep roof, clinging to the pinnacles for support then they simply walked along the lip poking the gargoyles as they walked past. Tag greeted every second or third one as he poked. 'Evening. Anyone in there? Excuse me, are you alive?' After ten minutes he stopped. 'Man I feel stupid,' he muttered under his breath.

'Stupid is as stupid does,' quipped Em.

'Yeah,' agreed Tag as he continued along the roof, poking and greeting.

An hour and a half later they concluded that, if the Prof had seen a moving gargoyle, then it hadn't been anywhere near his residence.

'What now?' Asked Bastian.

'I reckon that we go down to street level and ask a few students where we can look at gargoyles. It seems like the sort of thing they would know.'

'Cool,' agreed Tag. 'Let's do it.'

They traipsed back to the Prof's apartment and exited the building via the narrow stairway. When they exited into the street they were greeted by the sight of many people, despite the late hour.

Em approached a couple who looked both friendly and local.

'Hi,' she greeted.

They both nodded back.

'I wonder if you could help,' continued Emily. 'My friends and I are from out of town, we're actually here to take a look at the local architecture, particularly the gargoyles. Just been checking out the ones on the roof. Do you know of any others in the town? Preferably bigger ones, you know, sort of life size plus?'

'Seriously?' Asked the male of the couple. 'Gargoyle watchers? That's a new one. Pretty cool.'

‘Yeah,’ agreed the girl. ‘Seriously weird hobby. Tell you what, why don’t you take a walk down Gonville Place over there, go to the junction with St Andrews Street and Hills Road, towards the spire of the Roman Catholic church. The church is covered with gargoyles and carvings of animals and monsters. More than you can shake a stick at.’

‘Also try the Fitzwilliam Museum,’ said the guy.

‘The girl shook her head. ‘No way. There aren’t any gargoyles there. Just those huge bloody lions.’

‘Is so,’ insisted the male. ‘Seen them. Life size ones.’

‘No,’ she shook her head again. ‘Just lions.’

‘Oh well then,’ conceded the male. ‘Fine. But if you do want to see lions then that’s the place to go. Massive ones. Awesome.’

The girl rolled her eyes. ‘They don’t want to see lions.’

‘Well if they did,’ insisted the guy as he turned to face the three friends. ‘Look, it’s on your way. Take a look, costs nothing and the lions are great.’

Em smiled her thanks and they proceeded to follow the couple’s directions. After ten minutes of walking the huge white edifice of the Fitzwilliam Museum came into view, dominating the skyline.

‘Whoa,’ said Tag. ‘That dude was right. Check out the lions.’ Then he did a double take. ‘Hold on, he was right about the gargoyles too. Check it out. There is one.’

Both Em and Bastian looked but couldn’t see any gargoyles, although they both admitted that the lions were spectacular.

‘Over there,’ insisted Tag. ‘In fact I’m sure that it just moved.’ He pointed and walked forward into the road.

Straight into the path of a speeding Jeep Cherokee. The SUV struck the big man at about fifty miles an hour. According to government statistics, when a human is struck at thirty miles an hour there is a fifty percent chance of death. When the speed rises to forty the risk jumps to ninety percent. At fifty miles an hour there is little to no chance that the person will survive.

The vehicle broke both of Tag’s legs, his arms, eight ribs and his back. It also ruptured his spleen, collapsed his lungs and threw his body over twenty feet along the road.

The Jeep squealed to a halt and the driver, a middle aged man, jumped out and started running over to Tag’s supine body.

‘Oh my God,’ he shouted. ‘I didn’t see him. He just walked out into the road. I couldn’t stop.’

Tag got to his knees, shook his head, stood up and looked at the distraught man running over to him. ‘That was close,’ he said. ‘No worries, mate. I’m fine.’

The driver stopped dead and stared at the big man. Tag’s shirt and trousers were torn. Blood ran down his face and arms and he had lost

one of his shoes.

'But…' the driver's face was a picture of bafflement. 'You…I hit. I thought that you were dead.'

'Must have looked worse than it was,' said Tag as he bent down to retrieve his shoe and put it back onto his foot. 'Still, no harm no foul.' He patted the middle aged man on his shoulder as he walked past him. 'Come on, guys,' he called to Em and Bastian. 'Let's go take a look at the Museum. I'm still convinced I saw one of those ugly dudes up there.'

Emily stifled a smile as she followed the big man across the road.

Behind them the driver of the car stood staring at the crumpled wreck of his Jeep, shaking his head and wondering if he was hallucinating or if he had simply lost his mind.

The trio decided to go around the back of the Museum and scale the walls. They did this by using the various frescos and carvings as hand and foot holds, reaching the roof with relative ease.

Unlike the college roof, this one was mainly flat and walking about on it was as easy as taking a postprandial stroll.

Eventually they found Tag's single gargoyle situated on the edge of the right hand side of the building overlooking the city. A large, winged statue. Well weathered, covered in lichen, fangs protruding from its gaping maw. Hands clutched to its chest and eyes wide open.

Tag walked straight up to it and poked it on the cheek. 'Hey, dude,' he said. 'You in there?'

Nothing happened so the big man poked again. 'Hello. Wassup?'

'Leave it out, Tag,' said Em. 'It's just a statue. A lump of stone. An inanimate object.'

The gargoyle snorted. 'You're an inanimate object,' it rumbled. Its voice so low as to raise the hairs on ones arms as it talked. A thundering cadence right at the very lower register of human perception. Almost like it was projecting its thoughts directly into your brain as opposed to mere oral communication.

Tag smirked. 'Told you,' he said. Then he held out his hand to the living statue. 'Pleased to meet you, mister gargoyle dude. I'm Tag.'

The gargoyle turned to look at the big man and then, with glacial speed, put his hand out. Tag waited patiently. They shook and then the gargoyle went back to clutching his hands to his chest.

'I'm sorry about the whole inanimate object thing,' he rumbled. 'It just that you humans are so quick to jump to hasty conclusions.'

'No worries,' said Em. 'What do we call you?'

'I am known as Coldstone.'

'So, Coldstone,' continued Em. 'Are there many of you?'

'Not as many as there once was,' admitted the statue. 'In times before there were as many as a thousand in Cambridge alone. However, over

the last few centuries, and even before, most have fallen to the stone-sleep.'

'Stone-sleep?' Enquired Bastian.

'We enter a somnolent phase during daylight hours,' explained the gargoyle. 'To a casual observer we would appear as stone. Inanimate objects, as you so aptly put it. But at night we come alive. You see, as Guardians against the night-walkers there was no need to be animate during the day. However, as the scourge of the night-walkers diminished, so did our need to awaken. Eventually, one by one, my brothers simply remained in a state of hibernation. After a few decades this hibernation became permanent. They succumbed to the stone-sleep. Essentially, they lost their life-spark and reverted to simple statues once again.'

'That's sad,' commented Em. 'So how many of you are there left?'

Coldstone shrugged. It made a sound like two boulders being rubbed together. 'In Cambridge, perhaps six. In the whole of the kingdom, who knows? I would venture to guess at a number around a thousand. Perhaps a few more.'

'Well that's quite a lot,' stated Tag.

'Really?' Questioned the gargoyle. 'There are over twenty thousand church buildings in the kingdom. That isn't counting other buildings of importance that we used to guard. There were over a quarter of a million living gargoyles back in the day. Now we are but a shadow of our former power. Anyhow, so what? The wars are over. Our time has gone and the few of us that still cling to life do it more out of stubbornness than any actual need for us to still exist.'

'Got news for you, stone-man,' said Tag. 'Wars are back.'

'We need your help once again,' interjected Emily. 'The vampires hunt once more and the Pack has been diminished to the point that we can no longer patrol in sufficient numbers. The bloodsuckers are killing humans at will.'

Coldstone shook his head. 'No good,' he said in his treacle-slow voice. 'The masters have all gone. I cannot communicate over distance to aught but my designated master. And I have not felt his presence for many centuries now.'

'What about other gargoyles?' Questioned Em.

'Them I can communicate with. Any of them,' continued Coldstone. 'All of them. Separately or *en masse*.'

'What about the magician, Merlin?' Asked Em. 'Could you communicate with him?'

The gargoyle made an odd sound. A grinding percussion, like a sock full of pebbles been shaken about. It took Emily a while to realize that Coldstone was actually laughing.

'Child,' he said. 'Merlin has been dead for centuries. He died during

the last great vampire war between King Arthur and the bloodsuckers.'

'Wrong,' said Tag. 'He's alive and well. Hanging around with an old dame who's also a young dame who's also a crow sometimes.'

'The Morrigan?' Questioned Coldstone.

'That's it,' confirmed Tag. 'He's with the Morrigan. Two of them are thick as thieves.'

'This changes all,' said the gargoyle, almost to himself. His face lit up in as much as it was possible for his grotesque features to show emotion. 'The great magician can reassign our masters. He can make us all subservient to him and thereby we could all communicate to Merlin. Once again we could be a force for good. We can help.'

'Cool,' said Tag. 'I mean, that's gotta be better than sitting on a roof all day, draining rain water through your head and watching tourists walk by.'

'You have no idea,' confirmed Coldstone. 'Boredom is a concept that can only be truly understood by someone who has not moved more than fifty paces in the last three hundred years. The thought of once again being of service is overwhelming.'

'So what's the next step?' Asked Em.

'Go to Merlin,' answered the gargoyle. 'Tell him about me. He will need my full maker's name. Tell him it is, Coldstone Matthew Kent Granite, Guardian Seventeen thousand nine hundred and ninety four. He needs my exact nomenclature in order to change my master status. Once he has done so then I will contact all of my brothers and he can change them. Or at least change enough of us to be able to communicate directly with him and form a network of communication.'

Tag patted the gargoyle on the shoulder. 'Good one, dude.'

Em kissed the living statue on the cheek. 'Be seeing you, Coldstone,' she said. 'Thanks.'

The gargoyle raised an eyebrow in surprise. But he did it so slowly that by the time he had registered his emotion the three friends were gone.

So he crept a little closer to the edge and watched.

And waited.

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Chapter 25

Merlin had been casting spells since Emily had gotten back and he was utterly exhausted. The young Shadowhunter had watched the magician for a while but, contrary to what she had expected, spellcasting seemed to consist mainly of Merlin sitting in a comfortable chair with his eyes closed and a frown of concentration on his face.

Every now and then he would break out in a sweat.

That was it.

So she grabbed a Desert Eagle .50 pistol and a couple of boxes of ammunition and went to the shooting range. Before she got there she could hear that someone else was already practicing. She was surprised to find that it was Tag.

'Hey, big man.'

'Hey, Em.'

'Didn't know that you were big on firearms training,' observed Emily.

The big man shrugged. 'Like to keep my hand in, even though it comes real natural to me.'

He ripped off a few more rounds and Emily was impressed to note that every shot was center mass on the human silhouette target.

'Pretty good shooting.'

'Yeah,' admitted Tag. 'I've always been the best. Well, until you lot showed up. Now I'm just the nerd amongst the X-Men.'

'Rubbish,' said Em. 'You're the un-killable, dead-shot, strong as an ox, superhero.'

Tag grinned. 'I suppose I am,' he said. 'That be true. Don't mess with Tag 'cause you ain't never gonna put him down.'

He blasted off another fifteen rounds, hitting with every one of them. Then he turned to Em with a grin. 'Thanks, girly,' he said. 'I was feeling down but now I be A-Okay.'

'You're welcome,' replied the Shadowhunter.

Tag collected up his gear and left, a spring in his step.

Emily carried on plinking until she had expended all of her ammo and the target was a simply a ragged piece of paper.

Then she went back to the house to see what Merlin was up to. When she entered the room, William was already there and the magician was drinking a cup of tea.

'You did well,' he said to her. 'That gargoyle, Coldstone, was a very high echelon Guardian. When he contacted the remainers they

listened.'

'Remainers?'

'It's what they call the gargoyles that still have the life-spark,' explained Merlin. 'It was hard to tell but I figure that there must be about one thousand two hundred of them. They're scattered pretty evenly about the United Kingdom. Sounds like a lot but, in reality, as there are fifty thousand or so towns and villages in the UK, it's a drop in the ocean. One Guardian for every four settlements. Less actually because some are grouped together, three or four on one building.'

'It's a start,' said Emily. 'So what next?'

'I can communicate directly with a few of them,' said Merlin. 'Coldstone, obviously, plus another thirty that I chose merely on geographical placement. Even those few took me all day to connect with, but it's enough. If any of the Guardians see a vampire then they will either contact me directly or they will contact one of the thirty who will, in turn, appraise me of the situation.'

Emily thought of Coldstone and wondered what it must be like, sitting alone for centuries, watching, waiting.

'It's what we do,' said a voice in her head. The young Shadowhunter did a double take.

'What is it?' Asked Merlin.

'Coldstone,' she said. 'I think that he just spoke to me.'

'Impossible,' quipped Merlin. 'Well, not impossible but shall we say, highly unlikely. You two haven't been connected.'

'She was born connected,' said the voice. 'She merely had to come into her power.'

'There,' said Em. 'Did you hear that?'

Merlin nodded. 'Extraordinary. Gods, girl,' he continued. 'Something that you could have told me this morning before I spent a whole day performing such exhausting magiks.'

Em shrugged. 'Didn't know this morning.'

'Is it just Coldstone?' Asked Merlin. 'Or can you speak to others?'

'I don't know,' admitted Em. 'I don't know any others so it's hard to think of them, if you get my drift.'

'We are all aware of you,' said Coldstone.

A chorus of deep, resonant voices greeted Emily. Some of the voices were smooth and cultured, others more akin to rocks rolling down a hill. But they were all different. She tilted her head to one side as she listened and found, with a bit of concentration, she could tell which direction they were coming from.

'They're all saying hello,' she informed Merlin.

'All thirty of them?'

Em shook her head. 'Sounds like hundreds.' Then she attempted to mind-speak to Coldstone alone. 'How do I stop the noise?' She asked.

‘Just think, stop,’ he answered.

Em did so and the rising cacophony stilled instantly.

‘Thanks,’ she said.

‘You are welcome. If you need me, think of me. Meanwhile, we have work to do, the night is falling and we shall be in touch.’

Merlin smiled. ‘Great, I formally place you, Emily Hawk, in charge of the Guardian network. Now that’s one less thing that I have to worry about. Next, I recommend that you use William’s help to contact the Pack and tell them of what has transpired. Ready them all for the hunt and remember, I want them to catch me a few vamps alive so that they can lead us back to their nests.’

‘Excellent,’ quipped Em. ‘More work. Love it.’

***

The next few days were probably some of the most frustrating that Em and her companions had experienced for a while. The Guardian system worked perfectly and, in the first four days the gargoyles spotted six vampires out hunting. But the pack did not manage to apprehend one of them. The geographical distances were simply too large. While Charlie, Delta, Echo and Foxtrot groups were placed at pivot points across the country, every sighting that occurred was just too far away to take advantage of. By the time the group got there, the vamps had killed and were gone.

‘We have to break the groups up,’ said Em. ‘There are five wolves and twenty five Purebloods with each group, so put one wolf in charge of five Purebloods. That would still be a kickass team. Then spread them around. Out in the country. Away from the cities. That way we at least have a chance of lucking out and cutting down our reaction times.’

‘It’s not a bad idea,’ admitted William. ‘But it does carry an element of danger. The Purebloods are good but if a group that size came up against a clutch of three vamps they would struggle. Depending on the wolf that was with them.’

‘Look,’ said Em. ‘I don’t mean to be harsh but, that’s just tough. This isn’t a school prom, it’s war. We need to take some risks because what we’re doing at the moment simply isn’t working.’

William nodded. ‘Okay. I’ll tell the Pack. But first let’s take a look at a map and plan where we’re going to deploy the smaller groups.’

Em, Tag, Bastian and William spent the next hour with a large scale map and a box of red pins arguing about the placement of their new fast reaction groups and, when they had all agreed, William communicated with the Pack, telling them what to do.

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Chapter 26

Troy had been put in charge of five SAS Purebloods. Hard taciturn men who were at the very peak of their skills. Trained killers. They treated the young wolf with the maximum of respect.

William and Em had moved his team, now referred as simply as Team Troy, to the large village of Silverburn some twenty miles outside of Edinburgh.

Then they had got the call. A vamp had been spotted by one of the Guardians situated in Carlops, only a couple of miles away. They had jumped into their Range Rover and sped over, following the ongoing directions being fed to Troy, via William who in turn was being instructed by Merlin who was in direct touch with the Guardians.

A veritable broken-telephone chain of communication.

By the time they pulled into the main street of the village it was empty but William told them to drive past the church and take the first lane right. That was the point that the gargoyle on the church spire had lost sight of the hunting blood sucker.

Troy followed instructions and, halfway down the lane they saw two people walking. A male and a female. It was instantly apparent by the way that they moved that they were leeches. Even though they tried to ambulate like humans their movements were simply too fast. Staccato and speeded up like an old-timey movie.

There was no subtlety in Troy's plan. He simply stepped on the gas, pulled in front of the couple and jumped out at them. They reacted with alacrity, attacking him as he morphed into his wolf form.

And then it was a melee of claws and teeth and talons and fur as the three of them fought at speeds that baffled the human eye. Such was the intensity of their combat that the Purebloods dared not intervene as they might easily have harmed their team leader if they did so.

Within seconds it was over. One vampire lay in pieces on the pavement. Head, torso and both legs detached. The second, the female, was unconscious. A huge tear in her throat and both arms badly broken. She would recover due to her innate vampire abilities but it would take time. Troy had judged her injuries finely and ensured that he had gone far enough to incapacitate but not so far as to bring on the true death.

Two of the Purebloods wrapped a length of silver coated chain around the unconscious vamp, manacled it together and then tossed her unceremoniously into the trunk of the SUV.

Troy was about to get into the car after instructing one of the Purebloods to drive when he had a sudden vivid flare of Emily's voice in his head. Almost like a movie flashback. He shook his head and ignored it. Then it came again. A clear vision of her face. She wasn't speaking but he could hear her thoughts. She was wondering how his mission was going. Impatiently waiting for him to contact William so that she could question him.

'Emily?' He asked, thinking her name internally, not speaking.

He saw the surprise on her face.

'Troy?'

'Man,' Troy continued. 'Weird. Is that actually you?'

'I think so. I was thinking about you and the next thing, you spoke to me.'

'So you were thinking about me,' quipped Troy with a grin.

'Not that way,' interjected Em. 'I was wondering if you found the vamps.'

'Yep,' communicated the young wolf. 'Put one down and got the other on ice. We'll be there in a few hours. Tell Merlin and the Omega.'

'So, we can communicate now,' said Em unnecessarily.

'Appears so,' said Troy. 'Unless I'm having some sort of mental breakdown.'

'What about me then?' Asked Em.

'Maybe it's some kind of shared illusion,' said Troy. 'No, wait. That doesn't make any sense. If I were going mental then you wouldn't actually be involved at all. It would all be a figment of my imagination. Tell you what; we'll talk about it when I get there. See you soon.'

'Sure thing,' said Em. 'See you soon.'

Troy climbed into the Range Rover and they set off for William's forest hideaway.

***

Emily settled back into her wingback chair and stared at the ceiling. '*How the hell did I do that?'* She asked herself. The she relaxed and decided to contact Coldstone, for no other reason than to once again test her communication skills, maybe have a bit of a chat.

'Coldstone?'

'Shadowhunter?'

'How goes things?' Asked Em.

'I watch,' answered the gargoyle.

Emily waited for the living statue to expand but he did not. It occurred to her that it was obvious that a gargoyle was not the correct being to approach if you simply felt like a bit of idle chatter. After all,

he wouldn't have much to discuss. He moved perhaps ten or twenty feet a year and he watched. In two words he had summed up his existence.

'Umm…cool,' said Em. 'Okay, bye now.'

Coldstone didn't react and Emily broke contact and sat still again. Thinking.

After a while she decided to concentrate her thoughts on Lucas Cain, the Alpha of the Protectors M.C. She formed a picture of him in her mind and then simply called his name.

'Lucas.'

'Shadowhunter girl?'

'Yes.'

'How are you doing this? Is the Omega with you?'

'No.'

'So you are doing this by yourself?'

'Yes.'

'And is it true that you can also communicate with the stone people?'

'Yes. Sorry about all of the one word answers,' quipped Emily. 'It's all a little overwhelming.'

'Answers are answers,' said Lucas. 'They are not graded according to word count. You must tell the Omega. This might be important. Or it might just be one of those things.'

'I will. Thanks.'

'See you later, girl.'

'Emily.'

'Emily then. Sorry.'

The young Shadowhunter stood up and went to find William, who was, as usual, in the kitchen with Merlin. Both of them drinking tea. Em helped herself to a mug. Then she sat down and told William about her newfound skills at communicating with the wolves.

The Wolfman raised an eyebrow. 'Amazing,' he said. 'Tell me, when you communicate with them, what does it feel like? I mean, can you feel their needs? Their desires? Emotions?'

Em shook her head. 'No, nothing like that. It's like a cell phone call. I talk, they talk. Nothing emotional or whatever.'

'That's very different,' noted William. 'When I communicate it's almost all emotion. The message comes across but only as a part of everything else. I feel what they all feel, their thoughts fight against mine. It's never easy. When I commune with the Pack it is always a struggle. I have to fight so that my thoughts achieve ascendency over theirs. Survival of the fittest kind of deal.'

'Oh,' said Em. 'The whole, "Life is suffering: To suffer is to live", thing.'

'I suppose so,' admitted William. 'If it's not worth fighting for then

it’s not worth having. Anyhow,’ continued the wolf man. ‘This is a good thing. You can communicate with the Pack and the gargoyles simultaneously. That should save time, streamline the whole hunting process. So, now you are the mistress of the hunt. I shall tell Merlin and the pack. Congratulations, hunt leader.’

Emily rolled her eyes.

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Chapter 27

The female vampire stared at Merlin with an expression of undisguised hatred combined with superiority. She was chained to a metal chair that had been bolted to the stone floor.

Merlin looked back at her, his face devoid of emotion. The Prof stood behind him. He was busy packing his pipe and mumbling to himself. The words were not audible to a human ear but the female vamp jerked her head towards him and laughed.

'So, human,' she said. 'You despise me and my kind? How little you know, imprisoned in your tiny lives of quiet desperation. Living out your three score and ten in constant fear of death. No wonder that you hate us. With your miniscule existences and your hollow lives.'

The Prof raised an eyebrow. 'Oh no,' he said. 'I despise you because of your lack of respect for the furtherment of knowledge. Look at you and your kind, as you say. Countless decades of life and experience but so little increase in comprehension. Of understanding. It is a sad waste of forever.'

'Human,' chuckled Merlin. 'I suppose, strictly speaking,' he admitted. 'I could still be considered human. Although I must admit, I stopped feeling as such many centuries ago. But, yes, I identify with the human race so, I suppose that you are correct, vampire, I am human.'

'Who are you?' Asked the vampire.

The ancient magician smiled. But there was no humor in his expression. 'I am Merlin.'

The vampire blanched. 'But you're dead. Everyone knows that.'

'Well, everyone is wrong,' said Merlin with more than a trace of smugness. 'And this,' he continued. 'Is the infamous, professor Brownstone.'

'The Boggart,' gasped the blood sucker.

'The very same,' agreed Merlin jovially as he walked forward and placed his hands on the vampires head.

'What are you doing?' She asked, her voice shaking with fear now that she knew who she was facing.

Merlin didn't answer; instead he closed his eyes and concentrated. The vampire stiffened as she felt the magician's mind take hold of her and roughly delve into her memories. Desperately she tried to fight him but it was like trying to hold onto a parachute in a gale. She saw her recent thoughts flash before her as Merlin stripped them from her consciousness. Walking, feeding, hunting, sleeping.

Merlin opened his eyes and removed his hands. ‘Got it,’ he said. ‘She shares a nest with five other blood suckers. Troy killed the one when he picked her up. The others are still there. I have the address. I’m off to tell William,’ he said to the Prof. ‘I have no further need of her,’ he continued. ‘Do with her as you wish.’

The Boggart nodded. ‘Excellent,’ he said. ‘I have been looking for a test subject for a few of the new weapons that I have been working on. I shall ask Tag to help me dispose of the body afterwards.’

The vampire whimpered in terror.

***

Troy’s team hit the nest as soon as he got the address. William had told him to wait for another team to join as backup but the young wolf was too impatient. Once again his Purebloods had no chance to participate. They entered the house by just smashing through the front door.

The three vamps were sitting in the lounge as the sun had already gone down. Troy changed as he ran into the room and by the time the SAS team members had entered behind him he was already engaging all of the vamps at once. The combat lasted a little over four seconds of hyper speed violence and afterwards all three blood suckers had been decapitated and torn asunder.

Troy changed back and one of the team members threw him a pair of tracksuit bottoms. As he was slipping them on one of the Purebloods approached him. His name was Benjamin Kingsman, he was slightly older than the others and he held the rank of sergeant when he was in the SAS.

He put his hand on Troy’s shoulder. ‘You alright?’ He asked.

‘Sure,’ acknowledged the young wolf. ‘They didn’t touch me.’

The sergeant nodded. ‘Look, boss,’ he continued. ‘You’re team leader, so what you say goes. But if I may speak freely?’

Troy nodded.

‘Good,’ said Benjamin. ‘Stop acting like such an ass.’

Troy did a double take. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, sir,’ continued the sergeant. ‘That we are a team. There are five of us and, like it or not, us Purebloods all have SAS military training. In fact we bloody specialize in these sorts of scenarios, barring the whole vampire side of it. So next time, sir, before you go crashing into the target area like some sort of bruiser on steroids, take a few seconds to ensure that you do things correctly.’

‘Hey,’ argued Troy. ‘There’s no problem. I got them all.’

‘This time,’ stressed Benjamin. ‘But next time, who knows? Maybe our intel isn’t perfect and there’s another two vamps in the kitchen. Maybe there’s ten vamps. So I suggest that we recce the next target.

Cover all of the exits and then go in. Agreed?'

Troy looked a little sheepish. 'Agreed. Sorry Benjamin. I wasn't thinking.'

'It's cool,' said the sergeant. 'Oh, and one more thing, you don't need to prove anything, sir. We all know that you are one serious bad ass.'

Troy smiled. 'Well there you're wrong, sergeant,' he said. 'When your nickname's Puppy, then you sorta gotta prove yourself. Every bloody day.'

Benjamin nodded his understanding and patted Troy on the back. 'Well, not to us you don't, sir,' he said. 'Not to us.'

***

Two days later one of the teams based outside London captured a vamp. After Merlin had stripped the required knowledge from him the team raided a house and killed another two of the bloodsuckers.

A week after that Troy's team did the same. With Emily in charge of communicating with the teams, the process was slicker, faster and more reliable.

They were still getting calls from Guardians that were too far away from any of the teams to help but, on the whole, both Emily and William were pleased with the results.

Vampires were dying. The Pack was hunting.

Humanity was back in the game.

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Chapter 28

‘Alaska,’ said Reg ‘The Savage’ Parsons.

‘I know that they live in Alaska, moron,’ snapped Nathan. ‘I told you that, remember?’

‘Yes, lord,’ said Reg. ‘Sorry.’ He took a map out of his jacket pocket and unfolded it on the table. It was a highly detailed map of Alaska. There was a red circle drawn on it.

Nathan glanced down at the scale guide at the bottom right hand corner of the map and did some quick calculations. ‘That circle encompasses an area of around ten square miles,’ he said. ‘I wouldn’t exactly call that pin point accuracy, would you?’

‘No, lord Nathan,’ agreed Reg. ‘But no worries. There’s nothing else there so it shouldn’t be hard to track them down.’

‘Fine,’ said Nathan. ‘Send a team of familiars. Professionals. We can’t afford a mistake. Ask our Italian brothers if they have any recommendations.’

‘Really?’ Questioned Reg. ‘I mean, lord, they’re just a couple of old retired professors living in the ass end of nowhere. Look,’ he threw a pair of passport photos down on the desk.

Nathan saw two older middle age people. A large man with long beard and unkempt hair, gray at the temples. And a women of oriental extraction. Tiny. Small boned like a bird. ‘Yep, I’m sure that you’re right. But they’re important, so send the best.’

Reg nodded and left.

Nathan stood in the center of the room. Thinking. Five of their brethren’s dwellings had been hit by the wolves in the recent few days. How? It was impossible to patrol and police an area the size of the United Kingdom with so few people. But, somehow, they were doing it. And, as a result, his brethren were dying. Worse, he still had no idea who, or where the wolves were.

However, he knew one person. Emily. Somehow this was all linked to her. She was bright, powerful and stubborn and he had underestimated her again and again. But no more.

Nathan was convinced that the girl was the glue holding the resistance together. The lynchpin of the attacks against his new family.

So he had tracked down her foster parents, hoping that he could somehow use them against her. If he threatened them he knew that she would come for them. Now all that he had to do was think of a

way of letting her know as soon as he had them in his custody.

And if she surprised him once again and simply refused to play ball… well then, he mused, he would simply consign them to the feeding pens. Win, win.

And then afterwards he might even send Emily Hawk a few of their body parts. Just for a laugh.

The head Bloodwraith chuckled to himself. *Prissy little miss-know-it-all*, he said under his breath.

He would show her.

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Chapter 29

‘Ryoko my darling,’ whispered Bart as he gently shook the tiny Oriental woman awake. ‘They’re here.’

‘Are you sure?’ She asked.

‘Definitely,’ answered her husband. ‘They have breached the outer perimeter, set off the silent alarms. The infrared cameras show that there are four of them. They move well but seem unused to the snow. Most probably city folk, not outdoorsmen.’

‘We knew that it was inevitable,’ said Ryoko. ‘We haven’t heard from Emily but it was only a matter of time before her enemies tracked us down to use as some sort of leverage.’

Bart smiled. ‘Well, we’re prepared so I reckon that this will not end well for them. Whoever they are.’

As he talked the two of them got dressed. Firstly, Extreme Cold Vapor Barrier Boots, or Bunny Boots as the Alaskans called them. This was followed by the Generation 3 Extended Climate Warfighter Clothing System that had been developed by the US Army. A system consisting of twelve separate sets of breathable insulated clothing. An absolute necessity for anyone planning to spend any extended time outdoors in a state where the current temperature was standing at minus six degrees Fahrenheit. The gear featured a disruptive digitized snow camouflage print so it blended well into the snow covered terrain outside.

Finally they each grabbed an MP5SD3, the Heckler & Koch submachine gun with a built in silencer. Bart also slipped a couple of incendiary grenades into his pockets after strapping on his webbing, his extra ammunition, water and energy bars.

Ryoko grabbed a sheaf of ten *shuriken*, or Japanese throwing stars, and clipped them to her belt.

Then the two of them slipped out of the house and disappeared into the trees, searching for the people that had come for them.

***

The four men usually worked alone or, sometimes, in groups of two. That all four had been sent on the same mission meant that the target, or targets, were of unusual importance. But all of them did wonder what target of any importance would be stuck out here in the middle of nowhere surrounded by snow and trees and more snow.

The men all worked for the Calvoneti Crime family based in New York and they came highly recommended by the Italian *Nosferatu*. On the whole, they were basically strong arm boys but they also did the odd hit and had been involved in more than a few kidnappings.

Even though sending all four was considered so much of an overkill that it verged on insult, Nathan had insisted and the money offered had been of sufficient quantity to offset any alleged sleight on their skills.

They had been dropped by helicopter some two miles from the residence and had trekked in using snow shoes to aid their movement through the deep snow. All four wore top of the range Ferrino designer outdoor winter wear. Top of the range, Italian designed and hand stitched garments suitable for the coldest European winters. And all four were the coldest that they had ever been.

'Hey, Louis,' called Jackie Pigolli, a short wide man who was, nominally, the leader of the group in that he had been a made-man longer than the rest of them. 'Chuck us another handful of the warmer-things you got. I'm freezing my ass off here.'

Louis delved into his fanny-pack, pulled out a few disposable hand warmers and threw them to Jackie. 'There. Careful I only gots about ten left.'

Jackie cracked the seals and slid one into each glove and slipped another three down his shirt. 'Holy Mother,' he cursed. 'Who knew that the world could get so friggin cold. I swear. And what's with this constant night crap? I friggin hate the dark. Not in the city, I mean this country dark. It's unnatural. At least there's a full moon but that's almost worse, it makes everything this freakin' blue color, it's driving me crazy. *Mi sta facendo impazzire*. We shouda asked double pay for this.'

'We did,' interjected Johnny Rockwell. The youngest in the group. Tall, handsome, slicked back black hair and what Louis referred to as 'an attitude'. 'In fact they's paying us triple.'

'Yeah, well, it's not enough,' snapped Jackie. 'What good's money when you've frozen your nuts off? What you think, Carmine?' he asked the fourth member of the group.

Carmine didn't even bother to acknowledge his boss's comments. It wasn't that he was pointedly ignoring him, it was simply that Carmine never talked unless he deemed it totally necessary. Ever. And most of the time he deemed it 'not necessary'. As he stood at six foot eight and weighed in at slightly more than a recreational vehicle, no one argued the fact. Or more pointedly, no one had argued the fact and lived to talk about it.

Jackie didn't push the question and instead looked at his Garmin portable geolocator, checking the screen to see that they hadn't

strayed off course. ‘Still heading the right way,’ he said. ‘Another mile. Just under, maybe.’

The group trudged on through the snow, picking their legs up in an exaggerated manner in order to account for the three foot long snowshoes.

‘Almost there,’ noted Jackie. ‘Now remember, boys,’ he continued. ‘We need them alive. You can rough them up all that you want but alive is the end game. *Capish*?’

There was a general murmur of agreement.

‘Hey,’ snapped Jackie. ‘I’m serious here. No killing. Especially you, Johnny, with you attitude problem. Okay?’

Johnny didn’t answer.

‘I’m talking to you, boy,’ repeated Jackie as he turned around to face the youngest member. But instead of seeing him in his position at the back of the group he saw his body lying curled up on the snow. ‘Crap, Johnny.’ Jackie walked back, moving as fast as he could. ‘Come on, guys,’ he urged as he reached the supine body. ‘Looks like Johnny here took a tumble. Give us a hand.’ He rolled the young man on his back. And flinched back in a perfect double take.

Sticking out of Johnny’s right eye was the tip of a metal star. The rest had been embedded deep into his skull. Blood ran down his face and dripped onto the pristine snow, the moonlight turning the red into black and the snow glowed blue. A surreal nightmare.

The remaining three men drew their weapons as one. They all carried slightly different variants of the Smith & Wesson model 19. A revolver chambered for the powerful .357 magnum round. Louis and Jackie favored the 4 inch version except that Jackie had gone for a custom gold plated job. Carmine, in keeping with his size, sported the 6 inch weapon in stainless steel.

‘What the hell is that thing?’ Shouted Louis as he pointed at the *shuriken* in Johnny’s eye.

‘Don’t know,’ answered Jackie. ‘Doesn’t matter. Whatever it is, stay well clear of any more of them, they definitely appear to be hazardous to your health.’

‘Hey, boss,’ rumbled Carmine. ‘You think that the rules still apply?’

‘What rules?’

‘The no killing rules, boss.’

‘No,’ snapped Jackie. ‘Screw the rules. If you see anyone, shoot them.’

The group of three hunkered down in the snow, peering into the cobalt darkness of the moonlit night, searching for their assailant.

Then there was a flash of movement and a small object about the size of a baseball arced through the air towards them.

‘You gotta be shitting me,’ exclaimed Jackie. ‘Grenade.’

The men jumped to their feet and shuffled away as fast as their snowshoes would allow, dropping to the ground and burrowing into the snow as soon as they were a few yards away.

The incendiary grenade exploded with a loud pop and the area was showered with a hail of burning phosphorous. The immediate vicinity was instantly shrouded in thick white smoke that cut visibility down to almost zero.

And out of the smoke stepped a tall man with a gray beard. In his hands he held a MP5 submachine gun. The weapon burped twice.

Louis went down hard, three bloody entrance wounds stitched across his chest.

Jackie rolled to one side but was still struck by two of the rounds. One in his shoulder and the other high in his chest. It burned like he was on fire.

The smoke cleared to find Carmine still standing in the center of the clearing. Like a mountain in the snow. Immovable. He raised his revolver. But before he could take aim a tiny women skipped across the snow and kicked the weapon from the huge man's hand. It tumbled away to get lost in the snow.

Carmine turned to face the woman, but his movements were slow and clumsy, hampered by his enormous snow shoes. The tiny Oriental woman jumped into the air, spinning as she did so. The heel of her boot struck Carmine on the nose with a sound like an axe chopping wood. The huge man went down like he had been shot. As he hit the ground the woman knelt next to him and delivered a knife hand strike to his neck.

Jackie heard the big man's vertebrae shatter, saw him twitch a couple of times and then still.

The man with the beard walked over and stood above Jackie. 'Well that didn't work out the way that you imagined,' he observed.

'Sure didn't,' agreed the mafia hit man. 'We should have asked for triple pay.'

'Would have done you no good.'

Jackie chuckled. 'True words you speak, my friend.'

Bart pointed his MP5 at Jackie's face. 'I am not your friend,' he said as he pulled the trigger.

***

It took Nathan four days to come to the conclusion that he had, once again, underestimated the situation. The mafia team had failed. But he was not the sort of vampire to make the same mistake again. This time he sent a group that he knew would succeed. Reg and four Bloodwraiths.

Because vampires do not set off infrared alarms. They have no

discernable body temperature. And vampires do not need snow shoes to travel in the snow, nor do they get picked up by CCTV as they simply move too fast.

And finally, vampires don't mind being shot point blank in the face with an MP5.

In short, if you want something done properly…

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Chapter 30

Troy's group had dropped off another vamp but it had transpired that he was a loner. Living by himself and hunting alone. So Troy and his men had taken advantage of the break and simply slept in and lazed around for most of the day.

As the evening drew in he wandered outside to find Emily standing on the verandah, looking out at the forest with a wistful expression on her face.

'A thousand dollars for your thoughts,' he said.

Em laughed. 'I thought it was a penny.'

'That's an insult.'

'I reckon that a penny would be about all that they're worth. But I'll take the grand.'

'Do you accept IOU's,' quipped Troy. 'Anyhow, jokes aside,' he continued. 'I wanted to thank you.'

'What for?'

The whole communication and control of the hunts,' he answered. 'I can't tell you how much it helps to have you in charge. Instant info, constant updates. Really awesome.'

Em smiled. 'Thanks.'

Troy nodded. 'And I must say,' he said, his face serious. 'It was sorta cool having you inside my head.'

Em felt herself blushing and then cursed herself for doing so.

Troy noticed her embarrassment. 'Oh no,' he said. 'That sounded way more intimate than it was meant to. It's just that, well, it's calming. Knowing that you have a friend close to you just before you go into battle. It's a great comfort.'

'A friend?'

The young wolf nodded. 'If I could be so bold as to call you that?'

'Of course,' agreed Em. 'After all, it's true. So when are you going back out?'

'Why, trying to get rid of me?'

Em laughed. 'No. Quite the opposite, it's nice to have someone to talk to. Some…' The Shadowhunter hesitated.

'Someone your own age,' finished Troy.

The teenager nodded.

'I get it,' said Troy. 'I mean, hell, they call me puppy. And to them I am one. It's not just that I'm the youngest, it's more than that. Do you have any idea what the age gap between me and the next oldest wolf

is?'

Em shook her head. 'How could I?'

'True,' conceded Troy. 'One hundred and twenty three years. Bobby Garton, red hair, rides the blue flathead. I mean, man, the guy fought in the First World War. Try talking music with a guy whose formative years were with bands like The Jesters and The Mills Brothers.'

'The Jesters,' said Em. 'They sang a song called "The Band Played On", also known by its refrain as "Casey Would Waltz with a Strawberry Blonde". It was a popular song written in 1895 with lyrics by John F. Palmer and music by Charles B. Ward.'

Troy stared open mouthed. 'How the hell did you know that?'

Em blushed furiously. 'I just know stuff,' she said. 'I'm sorry, I can't help it. It just seems that I remember everything that I've ever heard or read. It's like having the internet on your head. Sorry.'

'Hey, don't be sorry. It's like, uber-cool,' said Troy. 'Seriously. What else do you know?'

'I told you,' answered Em. 'Pretty much everything, within reason. I mean, I have to have heard it or seen it at some stage, but you'd be amazed at how much a person sees in their everyday existence. A hell of a lot.'

'How tall is the Empire State Building?'

'Really?' Questioned Em.

Troy nodded.

Emily sighed. 'The Empire State Building is a 102-story skyscraper located in midtown Manhattan, New York City, on Fifth Avenue between West 33rd and 34th Streets. It has a roof height of 1,250 feet, 381 meters, and with its antenna spire included, it stands a total of 1,454 feet or 443 meters high.'

Troy laughed long and loud. 'That was sick,' he said. 'I wish that I could do that.' He ran his hands through his hair and then pulled up two chairs, gesturing towards one. 'Sit.'

Em sat down. 'Thanks.' She looked at Troy for a while, studying him.

'What?'

'Nothing,' answered Em. 'I was just wondering, you guys all look the same. Well, not the same but of a type.'

'What type?'

'Golden eyes, strong jaws, tall, muscular, long hair, unshaven. You know? A type.'

Troy grinned. 'Have you ever seen a pack of wolves? Real wolves, out in the wild?'

Em shook her head. 'No, but I've seen documentaries.'

'Good enough. Would you say that the wolves all looked the same?'

'Sort of,' admitted Em. 'But not the same. Different markings, that sort of things.'

‘So you would say that they all looked of a certain type?’

‘Oh, I get it,’ said Em. ‘Pack.’

‘Pack,’ agreed Troy. ‘Of a type.’

‘But you could cut your hair, shave. Or would that betray some sort of Pack ethic?’

Troy stood up and drew a knife from a sheath under his shirt. Seven inch long Bowie. He flicked it into the air, caught it by the blade and handed the handle to Emily. Then he knelt next to her, grabbed a hank of his hair and held it out. ‘Cut it off,’ he said.

‘No. Why?’

‘Just do it.’

Emily took the blade and sliced through Troy’s hair, lopping off a large chunk of it and letting it fall to the floor.

The young wolf stood up, shook his head like as dog trying to shake water off after a bath and then knelt back down beside the Shadowhunter.

Emily ran her hands through his hair. It was soft and thick. And just as long as it had been before she had hacked half of it off. ‘It grew back,’ she said. ‘Straight away.’

Troy winked at her. ‘That’s one advantage of being a werewolf that no one ever tells you about,’ he said. ‘You pretty much never have to worry about having a bad hair day.’ He stood and held his hand out to Em. ‘Come on inside. Tag’s making tea and I could do with a sugar hit.’

Emily stood up, grimaced and followed him through the front door to the kitchen.

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Chapter 31

There were over two hundred Bloodwraiths in the major hall. Lined up twenty abreast and ten deep. Black leathers and blood red cloaks. Shades of Goebbels' and Hitler's ultimate fantasies

'How are they doing it?' Asked Nathan. Addressing everyone and no one in the room. 'Anyone, any ideas?'

Rows of impassive faces stared back at him.

'Well then,' he continued. 'It's time to exert a bit of pressure back. They dare to hunt us? We shall bring down retribution on the heads a thousand times more than they have done to us. We shall find them and wipe them out. Every last little doggy.'

He walked amongst the elite vampire enforcers, pointed at the first row and then swept his arm along to encompass the next fourteen rows. 'All of you,' he said. 'Row one to fifteen. One hundred and fifty of you. You will go out into the country in groups of ten. I will instruct you as to where you will all stay. Then I command you to go forth and hunt. Feed. Do so all ten at once. But ensure that only one or two of you are visible. The rest shall follow in a clandestine fashion. Stealth will be your watchword. And if the wolves attack the visible hunters, the rest of you shall descend on them like the wrath of Hades. But remember one thing, I want you to keep at least one alive.'

'For questioning, master?' Asked one of the Bloodwraiths.

Nathan shook his head. 'To the best of my knowledge that would be unsuccessful. Those wolves are tougher than granite. No, I simply want one to take a message back to his pack. A message to miss Emily Hawk. A message of dire importance to her.'

The ex-Shadowhunter walked back to the head of the gathering and flung his arms wide. 'Now go, my beauties. Go and show the wolves how deadly we are. Hunt. Kill.'

As one the Wraiths punched their right hand towards the ceiling, fists clenched.

'Blood and Honor!'

Then they filed from the room, their movements graceful and coordinated, their faces impassive but their eyes filled with the righteous glow of the fanatic.

Nathan watched them leave and he felt his chest swell with pride. His brothers. His people. His army.

After they had all left, Nathan walked across the room, exited via a side door and strode towards another set of rooms at the end of the

corridor. These rooms were accessed via a large single Oak door. Iron bound and sturdy it was locked from the outside by two massive barrel-bolts that slid into the stone wall itself. It would have taken a battering ram or a large armored vehicle to smash its way through.

The ex-Shadowhunter slid back the bolts and stepped into a small anteroom. Against the far wall was another door. Just as substantial, except that this one was made up of steel bars. Nathan looked in, a slight smile on his face as he did so.

The two occupants stared back at him with expressions of unabashed hatred.

Nathan laughed. 'Good evening mister and missus Emily. Please do not fret. I am in the process of sending your beloved daughter, or would we say foster-daughter, a message informing her of your unfortunate incarceration. Knowing the way that she thinks, I doubt that it will be long and she shall be here to…umm…rescue you? Well, attempt to do so, at any rate. Obviously she shall bring reinforcements with her. Wolves, perhaps a few other mercenary types. But what she doesn't know is that I have over two hundred highly trained, best-of-the-best vampires here just aching to tear them all to pieces.'

He laughed again. 'Revenge, best served hot and as soon as possible. But don't worry,' he continued. 'After I have taken care of her, I shall let you go free. So that you can continue that awful, boring existence that you call life.'

Nathan turned from the door and proceeded to leave the room. Just before he exited he looked over his shoulder. 'I was lying about letting you live, by the way. I mean, can you imagine?' He laughed again and closed the cell door behind him, slamming the bolts shut with a terrible finality.

Bart put his arms around his tiny wife, savoring his every last moment with her.

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Chapter 32

Tag had helped Emily set out a large scale map on the dining room table. First the big man had laid cork tiles on the wood and then he had secured the map itself. It took up the entirety of the huge twelve seater table and showed details as small as mile markers, picnic spots and turnstiles.

Then Em had taken three boxes of colored pins and marked the map. Red pins pointed out the location of all of the Pack members. Green pins showed where the Guardians were situated. Finally, the blue pins were for the vampires. At the moment the map was covered in green with a depressingly small number of reds scattered about, the visual impact of the pins showing how small the Pack's forces actually were.

There were no blue pins as Emily was waiting for the Guardians to spot a vamp and relay the info to her.

William watched from the doorway and the scene took him back to when he was an officer in the RAF during the Second World War. The Battle of Britain Bunker in Uxbridge. The pin-covered map, German bombers coming in with vastly superior numbers, a tiny gaggle of spitfires being sent up to stop them. Odds of over twenty to one.

And in the end. Victory.

He had faced these sorts of odds before and won but he knew that every day was a new one with different possibilities and outcomes. And the best that one could ever do was to simply do ones best.

Merlin peered in over his shoulder. 'Everything under control?'

William nodded. 'As much as we could hope for. And you?'

The magician shrugged. 'I have a feeling that we are in the lull before the storm. Or perhaps the eye of the hurricane. Still, all that we can do is wait and see.'

William was about to answer but Merlin had already left, gone back to sit with the Prof and continue his work on…whatever it was that he was doing.

Emily glanced up and smiled at him. William smiled back and he felt his whole body relax. The young Shadowhunter had that effect on him. She was sunshine and light in a period of utter darkness. But William was no fool. Only a few weeks earlier they had been close. Perhaps on the verge of a romantic involvement. But now he was Omega and all had changed. Their conversations no longer flowed freely but had assumed a stilted politeness. Where before, William had laughed easily and seen the brighter side of everything, now he found

little to smile about. Except Emily.

But the Omega had no time to flirt with young girls. The Omega led. The Omega was not a single entity. He was the sum total of the Pack. Life is suffering. To suffer is to live. The strength of the Pack is the Wolf. And the strength of the Wolf is the Pack.

He looked at Emily again as she checked the position of her pins. Waiting for the Guardians. She pushed a lock of her blonde hair from her eyes and then looked up and noticed him staring at her so she stuck her tongue out and crossed her eyes.

He laughed again and then left the room. His heart tight in his chest as he forced his true feelings down and pulled the ice cold cloak of leadership around him.

I am Pack.

Emily watched William leave and her heart sank. Just for a moment there she had seen the old William. The man who had taken her to dinner. Chatted freely about all things, laughed at her silly jokes, touched her so softly. Kissed her with enough passion to invoke a fire in her belly.

Instead of the cold hunk of steel that he had become. Serious to the point of aggression and as calculating as a machine.

And suddenly an image of Troy flashed into her mind. His infectious laughter, unkempt hair and piercing golden eyes.

Quickly she quashed the thoughts, nervous that, somehow, Troy might actually be able to receive them via the strange communicative link that she now had with the Pack. Instead she concentrated on her map, frowning as she did so.

She sensed someone next to her and turned to see Tag. He was holding out a mug of his awful over-sweetened tea for her.

'Here,' he said. 'You was looking a bit down so I made you some tea. It's got extra sugar for a pick-you-up.'

Em smiled, took a sip and managed to suppress her shudder. Oddly, after forcing it down she did feel a lot better as the sugar rush hit her.

'Hunt Mistress,' the grating of a Guardians voice interrupted her reflections. 'Guardian Flintheart here. Church spire, the church of St. Mathew-Under-The-Woods in Chesterton. Two vampires in the high street.'

Emily ran her fingers over the map, found the village and then looked for the nearest red pins. 'Right, Flintheart,' she answered. 'I have a team just outside Peterborough. ETA Ten minutes maybe less. Keep in touch.' Em glanced at her list to double check who the team leader was in Peterborough. A wolf called Edgar. Ed Bryton. She concentrated and called. 'Ed. You there?'

'I hear you, miss Hawk.'

'Two vamps in the village of Chesterton. Currently on the main

street. Two or three miles due West of you.'

'Yep, already got it on the sat-nav,' confirmed the wolf. 'Four minutes. We're on our way. Keep me posted on any movements.'

'Will do,' affirmed Emily.

Tag rushed out of the room and returned with William. Both of them loomed over the map. Waiting for the hunt to unfold. Faces tense, fingers drumming on the table.

'We're entering the village,' communicated Ed.

Emily moved the blue pin to the outskirts of the village.

'Flintheart,' she called. 'Where are they?'

'They're standing in a side road. The third one off the main street.' answered the Guardian. 'Odd. Just standing there in the middle of the road. Under a street lamp. Like they want to be seen.'

Em shook her head. 'No. They're simply careless. No idea that we have eyes on. Ed, the third street off the main drag. Turn left into it. The leeches are there. Guardian says they're just standing in the middle of the road. You can't miss them.'

'Roger that,' came back Ed. 'Turning now. There they are. Okay boys,' he said to his team of Purebloods. 'Let's take them out. Remember; try to keep one alive so we can track their nest.'

'What's happening?' Asked Tag.

'They're attacking. But I can't communicate with Ed. He's concentrating,' answered Em. She turned to William. 'Can you tell what's happening?'

The Wolfman shook his head. 'Not with any degree of accuracy. General feelings. Excitement. Anger. That's it.'

'Hunt mistress,' shouted Flintheart's voice in Emily's head. 'It's a trap. Ten more vampires approaching from the darkness. Hiding in the hedges. Alert. Alert.'

'Ed,' shouted Emily as she tried to grab his attention. 'It's an ambush.' There was no answer. Emily concentrated harder than she ever had before, willing her consciousness to span the distance between them and make contact.

Shadows.

A burst of light.

Emily's chest contracted and she felt her pulse rising as her breath came in sharp pants.

With a shock she realized that she was seeing through Ed's eyes. But she was a mere spectator. She couldn't communicate with him or effect his actions in any way whatsoever.

She was simply along for the ride.

The Purebloods' automatic weapons spat fire into the night. Their suppression systems making them sound more like giant typewriters than firearms. Normally their concentrated firepower would have

brought at least two or three of the vamps by now but the bloodsuckers were moving too quickly, flashing from place to place. Ed snapped at them as the sped past and his jaws connected briefly with one of them, tearing off a chunk of flesh.

But the leeches were moving differently to how they normally did. Instead of their point-to-point high speed method of fighting they were constantly keeping on the move. Dancing. Jumping. Rolling.

'*Capoeira*,' whispered Emily. 'They're fighting like Bastian. They're fighting like Shadowhunters.'

Two Purebloods went down in a welter of gore, followed closely by another. It seemed almost as though the vamps were attempting to keep the last two Purebloods alive but they couldn't. When it came to the SAS men, they either died doing their duty or they killed you. Finally the last two Purebloods fell to the floor, bleeding from a hundred grievous wounds.

Ed stood alone, growling deeply, fangs bared and fur standing up as he tried to keep all of the assailants in his arc of vision. But there were simply too many of them. At least ten. And they had surrounded him, standing nonchalantly.

Laughing.

'Time to die, little doggie,' teased one of the vamps as they all closed in.

And then Emily felt a pulse of thought from the lone Wolfman. '*Come and get it, you bloodsucking bastards*.'

And he leapt forward, slashing and biting right and left, tearing flesh and breaking bones as the vampire's talons and fangs tore him to shreds.

Emily's mind went black.

***

The smell of sweet tea.

A cool cloth on her forehead.

Emily opened her eyes to see Tag leaning over her, his face a picture of concern.

'Hey,' he said. 'You okay?'

'They're all dead,' whispered Em. 'The vamps killed them all.'

'Are you sure?' Asked William.

Em nodded. 'Can't you feel it? They're gone.'

William nodded. 'I felt Ed leave us. My connection with the Purebloods is not as strong. What happened?'

'The Guardians led the team to the vamps. But then Flintheart noticed that there were more vamps waiting in the hedgerows on the side of the road. Basically, it was an ambush. I tried to warn Ed but I couldn't contact him once he had gone into attack mode. But I was

desperate so I tried again. Real hard. And I managed to connect. But it was as if I was seeing through his eyes. Feeling his feelings. Except I couldn't communicate. I was a mere spectator.' Em took a deep breath. 'It was terrible. At least ten bloodsuckers attacked them.'

William shrugged. 'Long odds, but Ed and his Purebloods should have been a match for them.'

Em shook her head. 'Not these vamps. They were different. Faster, stronger. Somehow…more thoughtful. They didn't just blunder in, relying on their superior speed or rejuvenation powers. In fact,' Em hesitated. 'In fact, they fought in the same way as Shadowhunters.'

'Stands to reason,' said William. 'I mean there are limited types of martial arts out there and at some stage you always going to come across someone with a similar fighting technique.'

'No,' denied Em. 'I'm not saying that they fought *like* us. I'm saying that they fought exactly the same as us. Like Bastian, actually. *Capoeira.* They moved exactly the same way. They rolled and struck precisely the way we were all taught to by Bastian. The team didn't stand a chance. It was like we were fighting faster, stronger versions of ourselves.'

William said nothing for a while as he thought. Weighing up the possibilities. 'There's nothing that we can assume from, this,' he said eventually. 'They may even be a bunch of vamps visiting us from Brazil or Angola. That would explain the *Capoeira* techniques. It would be native to them. As to their speed, strength, well, sometimes we simply come across a bunch of vamps that are really good at what they do. Don't go looking for conspiracy theories where there most probably aren't any. I advise that we wait and see.'

Em nodded.

'Good,' continued William. 'Now rest, that was hard on you.'

He left the room without holding Emily or comforting her.

Tag held out a mug of tea that she took and sipped. Oddly enough she was getting so used to his atrocious concoction that she was actually starting to enjoy it.

She smiled at the thought.

The big man smiled back at her, pleased that he had managed to do something that she approved of.

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Chapter 33

‘Mistress,’ called the voice in Emily’s head, jerking her out of her silent reverie. ‘I see a vampire.’

‘Who is this?’ Asked Em.

‘Guardian Quartzblend. Town hall in the village of Broxbourne, North of London.’

Emily scanned the map, checking for the village. ‘Found it,’ she mumbled to herself. Then she checked for any blue pins that might be close. There was one in the town of Cheshunt. Close. She pumped her fist in the air. ‘Yes, finally.’

It had been a frustrating week. The Guardians had spotted vampires on six separate occasions but none of the sightings had been close enough to a Hunter Team to warrant sending them out. This sighting, however, was only minutes away from a team.

She ran her finger down her list. ‘Great,’ she said to herself. ‘Lucas Cain. The Alpha of the Protectors. Perfect.’

Em concentrated. Seconds later the Alpha responded. ‘Talk to me.’

‘A small village called Broxbourne. Northwest of you. Single vamp spotted.’

‘We’re on our way,’ informed the Alpha.

Minutes later he contacted her again. ‘Satnav gives us an ETA of six more minutes. Sitrep?’

‘Quartzblend,’ called Em. ‘What’s happening?’

‘Vampire still here,’ he answered. ‘Seems to be looking for something specific. Peering into windows, moving slowly. Currently walking down Church Street.’

‘Advise, can you see any other vampires around?’

‘No,’ replied the Guardian. ‘He appears to be alone. Mind you, the trees have grown somewhat in the last seventy years and my lines of sight are not what they are supposed to be.’

‘Keep an eye out for any more,’ urged Emily. ‘I don’t want this to be another ambush.’

‘Will do,’ confirmed Quartzblend.

‘Lucas,’ called Em. ‘Bloodsucker currently meandering along Church Street. Doesn’t appear to be any other leeches around. Go for it.’

‘We’re almost there.’

‘Lucas,’ said Em. ‘If you don’t mind, I’m going to stay linked with you. You won’t notice but I’ll be with you. Okay.’

‘Whatever you say, girl. Sorry, Emily.’

Em concentrated.

Her vision shifted. She could feel the cold of the night air. Saw the hedges and trees lining the village streets.

The car stopped.

She felt Lucas change. Human. Animal.

The power of the beast flowed through her body.

The wolf ran at the vampire who turned and fled. Moving with eye watering speed. Faster than any vampire that Emily had ever seen. But the wolf was faster. Grunting with effort Lucas/Wolf caught up with the bloodsucker as it entered a grove of oak trees, leapt and struck. Burying his powerful jaws into the vamps head and literally tearing the top of its skull off.

Emily could taste the blood and the flesh. But instead of grossing her out she reveled in the warm, salty flavor. It tasted of victory.

And then another vampire landed on Her/Lucas' back. They had been hiding in the trees.

Lucas howled, rolled to dislodge the leech and then struck back, biting and slashing with his forepaws. Moments later the Purebloods caught up and unleashed a hail of gunfire that lit up the night like the fourth of July.

The sheer weight of bullets ensured that one of the vampires was struck multiple times in the head and it went down, far too damaged to regenerate.

Lucas was facing at least five vamps and he dodged and bit, moving as fast as he could. But the vamps were slowly overpowering him and the deep slashes from their talons were taking their toll as Lucas' thick fur became sodden with his own blood.

Four of the Purebloods were down and one of the vamps shouted out. 'Keep him alive. The master needs a messenger.'

Two of the bloodsuckers grabbed hold of the last surviving Pureblood. However, as they did so he ripped one of the Prof's special hand grenades from his webbing, pulled the pin and laughed. 'Keep this alive, asshats.'

The explosion tore him apart, taking the two closest vamps with him as the silver coated shrapnel blasted through them, bringing on the true death.

That left Lucas, Alpha of the Protectors, standing at bay underneath one of the Oak trees, his fur drenched in blood, his body shredded by hundreds of deep, vicious cuts.

'Miss Hawk.'

'I'm with you, Lucas,' answered Emily.

'Good,' he said. 'It's nice not to die alone.'

The Wolfman gathered his strength for his final stand.

'No,' whispered Emily. 'You're faster than them. Run away.'

‘Lost too much blood,’ he answered. ‘Couldn’t run anywhere.’

Emily felt his muscles bunch up, ready to attack.

‘Damn,’ he growled to himself. ‘Wish that I could think of some cool last words.’

‘Run,’ wept Emily. ‘Please.’

‘Avenge me,’ shouted Lucas as he attacked.

Two more vampires died before the Wolfman succumbed to his wounds and all went dark.

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Chapter 34

Bart and Ryoko had not been fed for three days. There was a plentiful supply of water allowed but apart from that it seemed as though every effort was being made to make their incarceration as miserable as possible.

The toilet bucket had overflowed over a week ago and the stench had become so bad that their olfactory systems had shut down and now they honestly didn't smell it anymore unless they made an effort to.

Vampires and Familiars would come and bang on their bars at random times making sleep impossible. Staring at them like they were animals in a zoo. Or freaks in some Victorian circus.

Initially both Bart and Ryoko had tried to talk to the familiars, attempting to instill some guilt, some reason. Trying to gain a possible ally. But their attempts had been to no avail. The Familiars were too enraptured with the thought of immortality. Existing forever. Wielding power. Being part of something.

Most familiars were simply lost and worthless people looking to belong. Although some were true psychopaths, yearning for power, aching to wield their authority. To inspire fear more than respect. And willing to take the risk of having their brains fried when they were turned.

Ultimately the majority of them simply ended up as food.

Every now and then an obviously more senior vamp would come to the cell and stare at them. Whenever they did so it was almost impossible to break eye contact with them. Both Bart and Ryoko knew that the vamp was attempting to glamour them. To exert his or her influence on them. To control their minds.

But even in their weakened state they were un-glamourable. Conversely to what rumor and myth would have say, although vampires can glamour someone they struggle to do so to anyone with a powerful intellect. Especially when that person knows what the vampire is attempting.

But then, late one evening, the vampire that had visited them once before came to the cell. It was obvious that he was the leader as his sense of self-entitlement and power was a palpable thing.

'Good evening, Bart. Ryoko,' he greeted. 'I hope that you do not object to my calling you by your Christian names, after all this is the second time that we have met? You may call me Nathan.'

Neither of Emily's foster parents reacted but Nathan didn't seem to

mind. He simply stood and watched them for almost a minute before he spoke again.

'I know your daughter,' he said. 'Quite well, actually. In fact I was the first person that she met in this country. Yes. I suppose you might even say that we were friends.'

'Impossible,' spat Bart. 'She would never befriend a blood sucker.'

Nathan laughed. 'True,' he admitted. 'But this was before I was elevated. Back when I was a mere Shadowhunter.'

Bart expression was one of deep disgust. 'You unbelievable turncoat,' he said.

Nathan shrugged. 'Whatever. I have always believed that it is better to fight for the winning side. Anyone who does otherwise is worse than a fool. Like your precious daughter. An idiot. And, I must add, a soon to be very dead idiot.'

Bart lunged through the bars in an attempt to strike the arrogant monster facing him but he couldn't get close enough.

Nathan laughed out loud, genuinely amused. 'Oh how pathetic you are.'

'I'll kill you, I swear,' shouted Bart.

Nathan turned his full attention to the large man in the cell. 'You will do no such thing,' he said as his eyes bored into Bart's consciousness. 'You wretched, feeble human.' The ex-Shadowhunter turned the full force of his glamour onto Bart. 'On your knees, human.'

Bart shook his head. 'No. Never.'

Nathan sneered. 'Do you honestly think that you can resist me? Just because you resisted a few trivial attempts by my less than able brethren to glamour you?' The vampires eyes glowed a deep red. 'They are nothing. Now, on your knees before your master.'

Bart screamed in agony as Nathans power seared his mind and he sank to his knees, quivering with effort as he tried, vainly, to resist.

Ryoko ran forward to comfort him but one look from Nathan stopped her in her tracks.

'You too,' he commanded and she sank to her knees, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Nathan kept them both under his thrall for a few more minutes and then he released them, spat on the floor and shook his head.

'Pathetic.'

He left the room, slamming the interleading door shut as he did so.

Bart stood up, his legs and arms shaking from the effort. He went over to Ryoko, helped her up and hugged her.

'We have to get out of here,' he said. 'And sooner rather than later. That psycho bloodsucker has already told us that he is going to kill us whatever transpires, so no matter how high the risk, however small the chance, we need to take it.'

Ryoko nodded in agreement.

As it happened their first opportunity presented itself later that evening when a familiar brought them a jug of water. As always she approached the cell, bent down and pushed the jug through a small opening in the bars. As she did so, Bart grabbed her wrist and yanked her into the door, smashing her face against the iron bars and rendering her unconscious.

'Well what was that in aid of?' Asked Ryoko.

Bart didn't answer, he simply pulled the woman's head up against the opening and fumbled with her hair. After a few seconds he let her go and held up two hair pins that he had retrieved from the girl's bun.

Ryoko smiled in acknowledgement of his plan.

With quick sure movements Bart straightened the one pin and bent a right angle in the other. Then he handed the improvised lock picks to his wife.

'I can't fit my hands through the bars,' he said. 'You had better do it.'

The lock was old and heavy but Ryoko had it unlocked in just less than three minutes.

They nudged the door open and slipped out, moving as carefully and silently as possible. The place seemed deserted and Bart could only assume that the vamps must be out feeding or training or doing whatever the hell it was that the undead bastards did at night.

Before they entered a room they would both lay their ears against the door and listen as hard as they could before they pushed it slowly open and proceeded.

The building was huge and many of the rooms simply led one into the other instead of using corridors.

'Must have been built in the Elizabethan era,' whispered Bart.

'What?' Asked Ryoko.

'The house. No corridors. The first corridors were used at the end of the Elizabethan era. Designed by an English architect called John Thorpe. Clever chap.'

Ryoko smiled at her husband's incongruous way of thinking.

They listened at another door and then opened it. There was a large entrance hall. At the opposite end was the front door.

And it was open.

Bart grinned. 'Come on,' he whispered. 'Let's get out of here. Once we're outside I rate our chances. We're good outdoors.'

The two of them padded across the empty room, moving quickly but silently.

Four steps before they reached the front door, the room filled with shadow and the sound of whispers cut the air.

And they were surrounded by vampires.

Directly in front of them stood Nathan.

He smiled and then clapped slowly. ‘Oh well played,’ he said. ‘That was so close. How terribly frustrating for you.’

Bart’s shoulders slumped. ‘You knew,’ he said.

‘Of course I knew,’ snapped Nathan. ‘Do you think that I could miss the two of you crashing about like a herd of wildebeest? Good gods, you make enough noise to literally wake the dead. Or un-dead as the case may be.’

There was a ripple of laughter around the room. Minions showing polite respect to their master.

There was a whisper of air and Nathan was standing behind them. Both Bart and Ryoko turned but he had already moved and was standing in front of them again.

His arm flicked out and he slapped Ryoko across her mouth. A blow hard enough to split her lip and bring a squirt of blood to the surface.

Before Bart could react four vampires grabbed both his and Ryoko’s arms, totally immobilizing them.

Nathan leaned over the slight woman and then, slowly and deliberately, licked the blood off her lips.

Bart thrashed against his vampiric bonds as he tried to attack Nathan.

‘Let him go,’ commanded the ex-Shadowhunter.

The vamps immediately released Bart and he lunged at Nathan.

But the vampire simply struck him in the chest with his open hand. The blow smashed Bart back, slamming him into the opposite wall. The crackle of his breaking ribs sounded clearly.

Then Nathan walked over, grabbed the big man by the hair, lifted him to his feet and casually broke his left arm.

Bart grit his teeth, determined not to show pain.

‘Why are you doing this?’ Gasped Ryoko as tears streamed down her face.

Nathan smiled. ‘Because I can,’ he said. ‘That’s all. Because I can.’

He dropped Bart to the floor.

‘Now take them back to their cell,’ he said. ‘I grow bored. And will someone tell me why we still haven’t managed to take anyone alive so that we can send a message to that bloody Shadowhunter bitch?’

One of the Bloodwraiths stepped forward. ‘They refuse to be taken, master, it seems as though they would rather die.’

Nathan hit the Bloodwraith so hard that he flew across the room.

‘Pathetic,’ he screamed. ‘I don’t care what *they* want. Go and get me a live messenger. Now. Redouble your efforts. Even if you have to sacrifice your own lives. Emily Hawk must be contacted. Find. Me. A. Messenger.’

Then he threw his head back and screamed. Windows shook and light bulbs shattered as his voice rose into impossibly high registers, venting his frustration.

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Chapter 35

Not only had Emily witnessed the death of ten Pack members, she had been inextricably connected to two of them. In fact, when Alpha Lucas had died she had felt it. Every tiny detail. The pain. The frustration.

The utter hopelessness of death.

And a part of her had died with him.

She lay on a sofa in the sitting room and drank when Tag held a cup to her mouth but she did not eat. She breathed and carried out all of the usual autonomic functions. But her eyes, although open, were blank. She didn't turn her head from bright light or towards loud sounds.

Every now and then a single tear would trickle down her cheek. Tag would wipe it away.

'What is it?' The big man asked Merlin who was standing over the young Shadowhunter.

'Part of her thinks that she has died,' answered the magician. 'She was connected too closely with Lucas when he was killed and her psyche cannot separate her life from his. She experienced his death in such a real way that it has become reality to her. Fortunately she is so mentally strong that a semblance of life has remained. If this were any normal person they would have succumbed to the call of the ferryman. She would be gone.'

'What can we do?'

Merlin shrugged. 'To be honest, I am not sure. I have contacted the Morrigan. She is coming. Perhaps she can help. The Prof wants to feed her one of his potions. Who knows, that might work.'

Tag frowned. 'If the Prof comes anywhere near her I will kill him. Genuinely,' stated Tag.

Merlin nodded. 'I suspected as much. I told him so. He won't touch her.'

The air in the room shimmered and a huge crow appeared. Instantly it morphed into the beautiful Morgan La Fay, the form the Morrigan had taken to assuming when she was around Merlin.

Without greeting she walked over to Emily and placed her hand on the young woman's brow. Red light pulsed around her hand and Emily shuddered slightly.

'Don't hurt her,' said Tag.

'Quiet, fassy man,' answered the Morrigan. 'I'm concentrating.'

She continued to stand there, touching Emily's head for at least another five minutes before she spoke.

'She's gone.'

'No,' denied Tag. 'She's breathing. She's still alive.'

'Her body is,' affirmed the Morrigan. 'But her spirit resides in the halls of Charon. Even now she waits beside the river, waiting for him to take her to the other side.'

'Do something,' begged Tag.

'I cannot.'

'But you're a god,' shouted Tag. 'Can't you go and get her?'

Merlin put his hand on the big man's shoulder. 'You know not what you ask,' he said. 'Yes, it is possible for Morgan to cross the veil. But she would be unable to return. The gods can bargain with Charon but he will always strike the same deal. A life for a life. And it is unfair to ask the Morrigan to give up her life for Emily's.'

'What about me?' Asked Tag. 'Take my life.'

'I am sorry,' said Merlin. 'I mean no insult but you are a mere human. Your life holds little value to one such as Charon.'

William walked into the room as Merlin was speaking. 'What about me?' He asked.

Merlin shook his head. 'You are Pack. We cannot afford to lose you. I forbid it and without Morgan's and my help there's no way that you will be able to pierce the veil.'

'There is always the Right of Challenge,' interjected the Morrigan.

Merlin raised an eyebrow. 'No one has tried that nonsense for over six hundred years,' he said. 'And with good reason. No one ever survives. It's just another way of saying suicide.'

'What Right of Challenge?' Asked Tag. 'Can I do it?'

'No,' answered the Morrigan. 'Once again, the whole human thing stands in the way. Charon would never accept a challenge from a mere mortal.'

Tag looked pointedly at William.

'No,' repeated Merlin. 'I've already said, he is too valuable to risk on such a long shot.'

'What about one of the other wolves?' Asked Tag in desperation.

'None would stand a chance against the denizens of the underworld,' said Merlin.

'Perhaps,' said William. 'But then, there might be one who could stand a slight chance of pulling it off.'

'Who?' Asked the magician.

'Young Troy,' answered the Omega. 'He's young and he's more powerful than he knows.'

'But would he do it?' Asked Merlin.

William smiled. 'I have no doubt that the puppy would do anything

for Em. Anything.'

'Well call him,' said Tag. 'Get him here as soon as possible.'

***

Troy had arrived, pushing his Harley to the extent that he completed the five hour drive in just less than three hours. He kicked the stand down and ran into the house, bursting into the sitting room and rushing up to Emily's prone body.

'What is it?' He asked.

Merlin explained Emily's predicament and then went on to tell him how he could help.

Troy frowned. 'I'm not sure that I fully understand,' he admitted. 'Obviously I'll do whatever needs doing but are you saying that I have to somehow go to, well, purgatory or whatever and bring her back.'

'In a nutshell,' agreed Merlin.

'Seriously?' Asked Troy. 'I mean, where is this place? How do I get there? How do I get back? What do I do when I'm there?'

The Morrigan took Troy by the arm. 'Young wolf,' she said. 'Let me answer your questions. Firstly, the place that you would go is oft referred to as the river Styx. It is the boundary between the Earth and the Underworld and is controlled by Charon, the Ferryman who takes the departed across the river to Hades. As to how you get there,' the Morrigan took a deep breath. 'Only the departed can pierce the veil.'

'Departed?' Questioned Troy. 'By that you mean, Dead, don't you?'

The Morrigan nodded. 'But it's not as dire as you think. Merlin and I shall put you under a spell, stop your heart, your breath. Your life. But we shall keep you just within the boundaries. Then, if all goes well, we should be able to revive you.'

Troy nodded. 'Should? Okay, carry on.'

'Finally, as to what to do when you are there.' She shrugged. 'That will depend on Charon. You may have to fight. You may be subjected to tests. Torture. Whatever happens, it will not be pleasant.'

'Let's do it,' affirmed the young wolf.

'Fine,' said Merlin. 'Lie down on the floor next to Emily.'

Troy followed instructions.

'Now take her hand,' continued the magician. 'The physical contact should help you to locate her when you reach Charon's realm.'

Troy lay still and the goddess and the magician stood over him and started to cast their spells that were needed to break the veil. Light shimmered about them, coruscating and roiling. Growing as they chanted. If they were speaking in a language it was one that Troy had never heard before, ragged and discordant. Unsettling.

The light grew brighter and both the Morrigan and Merlin started to wave their hands over the two prostrate bodies, increasing the volume

of their chants as they did so.

The sounds of crashing waves filled the room, louder and louder until Troy felt as if his ears were going to implode.

A flash of even brighter light.

Silence.

Black fading to red and yellow.

Troy opened his eyes.

He stood alone. The blasted and ruined land stretched about him for many miles. The very earth was scorched shades of black and mustard-yellow. Above him a blood red sky with shreds of stygian cloud. Rivers of lava inched their way across the ground and above them arched ancient and crumbling bridges of stone.

In the near distance, a few hundred yards away, ran a river. The water was deep scarlet in color and a mist of ochre seethed and bubbled over it like pus running from an infected wound.

And on its banks sat Emily, staring out across to the other side.

Troy started to run towards her calling out as he did so.

The land shook as the Troy ran, shivering beneath him like it was seriously unstable. Jets of lava shot into the red sky and noxious gasses belched from open holes, filling the air with purple vapors.

Emily was no closer than when Troy had started to run.

After ten minutes the young man changed from human to wolf and increased his speed, pushing as hard as he could. All day long he ran, his muscles burning with fatigue, his paws bleeding from the numerous sharp rocks and stones that lay scattered across the land. His fir singed from flying droplets of molten rock and his eyes seared by poisonous gasses.

Not once did he falter or even slow. In fact the longer it took the harder he ran, pushing himself way beyond his physical capabilities and letting his mental side take over. Willing himself to keep running. To keep moving. To keep heading towards Emily.

And then, suddenly, he was there. Next to her.

He morphed back into his human shape and knelt beside her, ignoring the fact that he was naked because he had no choice and he could not communicate via his wolven jaws as were incapable of uttering human speech.

‘Emily.’

She turned and looked at him, her face blank. Expressionless.

‘It’s me, Troy. I’ve come for you.’

Emily frowned. ‘Where am I?’

‘Charon’s realm. That’s the river Styx. I have come to take you home.’

‘Why am I here?’ Asked Emily.

‘Long story,’ answered Troy. ‘But that’s not important. I think that we should start by standing up and walking as far away from the river as

possible. Not much of a plan but at the moment it's all that I have.'

Emily shook her head. 'No. I can't leave here. This is where you wait. You see, I'm waiting for the ferryman. That's how you get to the other side.'

'No,' argued Troy. 'You don't want to go there. You aren't dead. You're alive. Come on, Emily.' He held his hand out.

Emily growled at him and when she next spoke it was in Alpha Lucas' voice. 'Let me go, young wolf,' he said. 'I am weary and in pain. The suffering will not end until I cross the divide. Please leave me. I do not know how much longer I can stand the pain. Leave me.'

'No,' shouted Troy. 'Emily, talk to me,' he continued. 'Listen. Where are you?'

'What are you going on about, young wolf?' Asked Lucas. 'There is no Emily. Only me. And Charon will not ferry me across until you leave. Go. Now.'

Troy grabbed Emily's arm. 'Talk to me,' he urged. 'Fight it. You are alive. Emily.'

Her eyes fluttered and then her whole body shivered like a dog drying itself. 'Troy?'

The young wolf let out a sigh of relief. 'Yes. I have come to take you home.'

'What am I doing here?'

'When Lucas died his soul and yours were linked. He dragged you down to purgatory with him. I am here to get you back to the land of the living.'

'How?'

Troy smiled wryly. 'Not sure. To be honest I didn't even think that I'd actually find you. But I reckon that the further we get from the river the better. Come on.'

Emily stood up but when she tried to take a step she could not. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'But he won't let me go.'

'Who?'

'Alpha Lucas. He is in pain. He wants to end it and he can only do that if he takes the ferry.'

Troy growled in anger. 'Can I talk to him?'

Emily nodded and her eyes went blank.

'What is it, puppy?' Asked Lucas.

'Let Emily go. She needs to leave this place.'

'No,' said Lucas. 'You know the Pack credo, youngster. Life is suffering. To suffer is to live. I am no longer alive so I no longer have to suffer.'

'But the strength of the Pack is the Wolf,' countered Troy. 'And the strength of the Wolf is the Pack. Be strong, Alpha. Your suffering is nothing. It is imperative that Emily Hawk Shadowhunter live. She

needs to continue the fight. The Pack needs her.'

For a moment Lucas was silent. Finally he spoke. 'You shame me, young wolf. And you are correct. To suffer is our way. I will sit quietly and take the pain, although it tears at my very sanity. No one ever told me that being dead was so painful. I leave now. Do as you will, I shall not get in the way. But please promise me that you will let me pass over if you get the chance, I yearn for peace.'

'On my honor,' assured Troy.

Emily blinked. 'Right,' she said. 'Let's get moving.'

The two of them set off at a jog, heading at a right angle to the river. Not knowing where they were going, merely trying to distance themselves from the land of Hades on the other side of the river Styx.

As before, even though they knew that they were moving they seemed to stay almost in the same place for ages, moving mere feet for every hour of running. But as they had no other plan they simply kept moving.

'Is this real?'Asked Emily as they ran.

'In what way?' Asked Troy.

'I mean, are we actually here or are we actually somewhere else and this is simply a construct that our minds have created to provide an analogy of what is happening?'

Troy laughed. A short bark of amusement. 'Wow, deep. Not sure. I do know that our bodies are lying together in the sitting room at the Omega's forest lodge. We're holding hands.'

Emily blushed. 'So we aren't actually here.'

'We are,' countered Troy. 'Merlin assured me of that. Well, put it this way, this is no dream. If we stay here, we die. If we cross the river, we die. If something kills us here – we die. So it's as real a place to be as any other.'

'So how do we get out?' Asked Em.

'You don't,' said a voice like rolling thunder. 'Not without my permission.'

The two friends stopped running.

'Who said that?' Shouted Troy.

'I did, young werewolf.'

A man appeared next to them. Eight feet tall and dressed in rotting animal skins with a cloak of rags. In his hand he held a staff of ebony that matched his height. His features were skeletal, mouth but a cruel slash in his gaunt flesh, teeth gray and rotten. And he had no eyes. Instead his upper face was smooth, as if his forehead joined the top of his nose. Wisps of wiry red hair poked out from beneath his hood and stuck out in sparse clumps on his chin.

And he stank of rotting meat and sulfur.

'Charon?' Asked Troy.

‘I am known as thus,’ agreed the entity. ‘Also known as Kharon or Heros. I am the ferryman and you are in my domain.’

‘We are here in error,’ said Troy. ‘Emily came here by mistake and I was sent to take her back. Tell me, great Charon, how can we leave?’

Charon turned his head towards Emily. ‘Interesting,’ he said. ‘You are not human. Close, but not quite.’

‘I think that I’m connected to a werewolf,’ said Emily. ‘Maybe that’s what you’re seeing.’

Charon shook his head. ‘No, I see him as plain as day. Lucas Cain. Alpha. He is dead. You, however, are not.’

‘That’s what I’ve been saying,’ interrupted Troy. ‘So perhaps you could show us how to get out.’

Without turning, Charon flicked his staff at Troy, catching him in the chest and throwing him twenty feet away. ‘Manners, young wolf,’ he said. ‘Charon had not finished speaking.’

Troy got to his feet, wincing as he did so, and walked back. He noticed that when he moved he did so like he would have in the land of the living. Unlike moments before, he now did not take a few hours to cross the twenty yards.

‘I apologize, great Charon,’ he said.

The being waved his words away and continued to face Emily. ‘Yes,’ he said eventually. ‘I remember your parents. And their parents. And your entire line before. You are a Shadowhunter.’

Emily nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘Normally,’ continued Charon. ‘They only way to leave my domain would be to cross the river. There is no way back. No official way, at any rate. But as a Shadowhunter you are entitled to the right of challenge.’

‘Good, I think,’ said Emily. ‘And what is that?’

Charon pointed. ‘There is a bridge between here and there. It pierces the veil. But its way is treacherous. Cross the bridge and you will find yourself back home.’

‘That seems simple,’ said Emily.

Charon laughed. And it was like the thunder of a thousand coffin nails being driven home. ‘Nothing is simple, Shadowhunter. In fact, since the beginning only a handful of people have managed to cross the bridge. Custom dictates that you shall have a chance. It does not, however, say how small that chance can be and I am afraid that your chance of getting home is very small indeed. Infinitesimally so.’

‘We shall see about that,’ answered Emily. ‘How do we get there?’

‘Run,’ said Charon.

‘How long will it take?’

‘It will take as long as it takes,’ answered Charon. And then he simply disappeared.

‘Weird,’ said Troy. ‘Come, let’s run.’

They headed off in the direction that Charon had indicated, running at three-quarter pace. It didn’t take long for them to realize that their locomotion was no longer impeded by time and space as it had been before. For every step that they took they traveled one step forward.

An hour later Emily pointed. ‘There. Bridge.’

Troy snorted. ‘I reckon that’s stretching the use of the word some.’

The bridge was little more than a series of frayed ropes and rotten boards that stretched across a chasm of unquantifiable depth. It wasn’t long. Perhaps only two hundred yards. But it swayed in the wind and, as they watched, some of the planks fell off and ropes frayed even further.

‘Well it’s the only way out,’ replied Em. ‘So let’s not tarry and so forth. Let’s just get across it as soon as possible.’

Emily broke into a full sprint. Troy morphed into wolf mode and followed.

But twenty yards before they reached the actual bridge the skies darkened even more and a swarm of large bat-like creatures swooped down, biting and clawing at them in an attempt to stop them.

Troy snapped back at them, catching the odd one in his massive jaws and tearing it apart. Emily tried to strike back but it was almost impossible. Whenever she did land a punch or kick the bat-like thing would simply tumble over in the air, right itself and launch straight back into the battle.

Blood started to run freely from both her and Troy as the hundreds of nips and scratches began to take their toll. Em searched about frantically for a weapon. Anything. A rock, a branch. But the land was bare. Desolate and blasted.

And then she saw it. Sticking out the side of a huge boulder only twenty yards away.

She sprinted over to check that her eyes weren’t deceiving her and realized that, although it was what she had thought, it was also totally useless to her.

Embedded into the rock was a four foot long axe. It’s head a poetry of shining steel. Double sided like a butterfly. Plain and un-engraved but made with symmetry and beauty.

In desperation she grabbed the handle and pulled. And fell over as the weapon pulled free of the rock with the greatest of ease. Amazed, she swung it about her head a couple of times, marveling at the balance and weight of the weapon and then she charged back into the fray.

The axe sang its song of death as it danced about her, slicing and dicing the bat creatures like a combine harvester. Blue lights sparkled along the edges of the blades as they clove through the air and Emily

felt her spirits lift and her strength increase every second that she held the wonderful weapon.

Thousands more creatures flew down towards them, hissing and spitting as they came.

Troy turned to look at Emily and tilted his head to one side in an attempt to communicate.

'You can talk to me, you know,' said Emily. 'I mean, we can communicate telepathically you know.'

The wolf managed to look embarrassed. 'Of course,' his voice echoed in her mind. 'With all of the stress I forgot.'

'I didn't,' assured Em.

'Well why didn't you tell me?' He asked. 'I could have run all this way as a wolf. Would have been much easier. I only stayed human so that I could talk.'

Em grinned. 'What and lose the opportunity of running for miles next to a strapping young naked man?'

The wolf raised an eyebrow. 'Whatever,' Troy said. 'I don't see how we're going to get out of this one. There are literally thousands of those creatures coming. They're going to overwhelm us by force of numbers alone.'

'All we can do is fight the good fight,' said Emily as she hoisted the axe.

The wolf nodded and pulled his lips back in a snarl.

'Halt!'

The command shook the very firmament itself, such was its power. And the creatures simply froze in mid air, seconds before they were about to sweep over Em and Troy like a tidal wave of teeth and talons.

Charon appeared beside them and pointed his staff at Emily. 'How did you get that?' He questioned.

Em hefted the axe. 'It's mine,' she answered. 'Took it out of that big rock over there.'

'Impossible,' returned Charon.

Emily laughed wryly. 'You'd be surprised at how often I hear that word. But it's patently possible because, well, here it is.' She swung it around her head and the blade made a soft fluting sound as it cut through the air.

The Ferryman's shoulders slumped. 'You are correct, girl,' he admitted. 'It is now yours. In as much as it could actually be possessed by anyone. Treat it with respect and it shall always be with you, waiting for your call. However, if you use it for immoral purposes then you shall feel its wrath.'

Em raised an eyebrow. 'It's just an axe,' she said.

Charon shook his head. 'No, it is not merely an axe. It is The Axe, left embedded in the rock by The Legend himself before he crossed over.

And now it has chosen you.'

Then The Ferryman pointed at the bridge with his staff. Thunder rolled and the bridge was no longer a rickety collection of rope and wood but instead it became an edifice of sturdy stone that spanned the chasm with strength and purpose.

'Go,' he said. 'Run and do not look back. I shall not bid you farewell, for we shall meet again.'

And the girl and the wolf ran across the bridge and into the roiling darkness on the other side.

***

The moment Em sat up Tag handed her a mug of super-sweet tea. Troy lay at her feet in wolf form, exhausted, his tongue lolling out as he panted frantically.

William placed his hand on Troy/wolfs head. 'Thank you.'

The wolf whined and rolled its eyes before laying his head on his paws, closing his eyes and falling instantly asleep.

'Is he alright?' Asked Emily.

William nodded. 'The trip took a lot out of him. Technically he's been dead for twelve hours. We were getting seriously worried. Thought that we'd lost both of you.'

'Yeah,' said Em. 'You look real cut up about it.'

William knelt next to her and took her hand. 'Just because I'm not weeping and wailing doesn't mean that I don't care,' he said. 'I do. It's just that I have to remain strong. For the Pack.'

'Sure,' said Em. 'To live is to suffer is to blah blah whatever. At least you sent Troy.'

'I didn't send him,' contradicted William. 'He volunteered. I would have come myself but Merlin refused to send me.'

'It's true,' affirmed the magician. 'Both he and Tag wanted to pierce the veil. Tag couldn't because he is human and I simply wouldn't allow William to take the chance. We need him here.'

Em's eyes softened slightly at the news and she returned William grip. 'I didn't realize,' she said. 'Thanks.'

Tag took her empty mug from her and helped her to her feet. 'Come,' he said. 'You need to rest.'

Em started to argue but as she stood she reeled from exhaustion so she simply allowed the big man to lead her to her room where he tucked her into bed like an infant.

Seconds later she was in a deep, dreamless sleep.

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Chapter 36

‘So where is the axe?’ Asked Merlin.

‘I don’t think that it’s real,’ answered Em. ‘Perhaps it was just some sort of metaphor or something.’

The Morrigan shook her head. ‘Charon doesn’t deal in metaphors. There is nothing more real than death. If he said that the axe will always be with you, then you have it.’

Emily sighed and held her hands out, palms up. ‘See, no axe.’

‘Don’t be flippant with me, child,’ scolded the Morrigan. ‘If this is the weapon that Merlin and I suspect that it is then you will stop acting like a sulky adolescent and concentrate on bending your will to the problem.’

‘What problem?’ Insisted Emily.

‘The problem of, where is the axe,’ continued the Morrigan.

Emily cast her mind back. ‘He said that the axe would always be there, waiting for my call.’

‘Well then, call it,’ said Merlin.

Emily rolled her eyes. ‘Umm…axe…hello. Where are you?’ She shook her head. ‘Sorry, it’s not answering.’

Merlin scowled. ‘Why are you being so obtuse, girl?’ He asked. ‘It’s like you want nothing to do with this. It’s very unlike you.’

‘She’s scared,’ said Troy as he walked over.

‘Not,’ retaliated Em.

‘Yes you are,’ insisted Troy. ‘And with good reason. You see,’ he addressed Merlin and the Morrigan. ‘If Emily finds the axe, conjures it up, whatever, it makes what happened real again. At the moment both of us can treat it like some sort of nightmare and, eventually, maybe we can even convince ourselves that it never happened. Pain and fear best forgotten type of thing. And trust me, Charon’s realm is a place that you would rather forget.’ The young wolf shuddered. ‘I tell you, being dead sucks. It’s like an eternity of suckiness. I really don’t blame Em for trying to forget about it.’

No one spoke for a while and then Emily gave Troy a warm smile. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘I’ll be alright now.’

And then she held out her right hand, closed her eyes and called for the axe.

With a shimmer of blue light the weapon appeared in her hand. She swung it in a figure eight. It felt as light as gossamer in her hands, perfectly balanced and deadlier than any weapon that she had ever

held before.

The Morrigan stepped forward. ‘May I?’ She asked as she held out her hand and touched the blade.

Em was surprised to see the goddesses’ eyes shine with unshed tears. Merlin also looked emotional and had taken to hiding his feelings under a dark scowl.

‘I still miss him,’ said the Morrigan.

‘We all do,’ added Merlin. ‘All who knew him. Take good care of that axe, girl,’ he added. ‘It was once owned by a truly great man. A legend in his own time. A man who lived by a simple code, saw right and wrong as opposite sides of a coin. There were no gray areas for him. He fought evil at every turn and became known as Deathwalker by those who opposed him. He has done you great honor by leaving you his weapon.’

Emily felt the axe return the emotions that radiated off the Morrigan and the magician, almost as if it were a living thing.

‘I will do my best,’ she replied. Then she brought the blades close to her face and kissed them. ‘And I shall call you, Deathwalker.’

Merlin nodded his approval.

Emily closed her eyes and opened her hand.

The axe flickered and disappeared.

‘Child,’ said the Morrigan. ‘There is one more thing that I would like to ask. Alpha Lucas. Has he gone?’

Emily looked puzzled. ‘Well, yes. Obviously. He died.’

‘Think before you answer,’ urged the goddess. ‘Has Alpha Lucas gone?’

Em thought. She delved deep inside her own consciousness, looking for any sign of the werewolf that she had died with. The man that she had pierced the veil with.

And there, right at the very edge of her perception she thought that she caught a glimmer. A single firefly in a stormy night. Almost not there. She concentrated on it but the harder she tried the more elusive the tiny spark became, blurring and dancing away from her.

‘He has gone,’ she concluded. ‘But there is something there. A part of him, very small, still remains.’

Merlin puffed his cheeks out. ‘Damn Charon playing games again,’ he muttered.

The Morrigan shook her head. ‘I don’t think so,’ she argued. ‘I think that the residue is natural. After all, Lucas was a very strong being, it was inevitable that a part of him would be left behind. But it is of no moment.’ She looked at Emily. ‘Keep an eye on that spark. If anything strange happens, tell me. Or tell Merlin. Okay?’

Em nodded.

‘Right,’ interjected Tag. ‘Emily needs to go to her room. She needs

more rest,' he flapped his hands at the others, shooing them like a flock of chickens. 'Tomorrow is another day and the girly is tired.'

Em laughed. 'That's true. But before I do head for the pillows, I wanted to quickly discuss a plan.'

Merlin nodded.

'It's obvious that the vamps have figured out that we're hunting them.'

There was a chorus of agreement.

'Cool,' continued Em. 'And it's also obvious that the last two hunts ended with our boys being ambushed by vastly superior forces.'

Again all agreed.

'But there's more to it than that,' she said. 'In the last fight, when I was with Lucas, I saw that these were not your normal common and garden blood suckers. These guys were disciplined. Trained. They fought like Shadowhunters. There were only ten of them but they took our team apart with ease. And normally five of our boys could take ten vamps. Or at least stand a chance of doing so.'

'So?' Said Merlin. 'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying that we call a halt to all hunts for now. We tell the Guardians to keep watching and we wait until we have a vamp within striking distance of us. This core team. Me, Troy, Tag, William, Sylvian and Bastian. From what I've seen I am more than confident that we could take ten of these new improved vamps. Then we bring one back here and question it.'

William nodded. 'Sounds good.'

Tag punched his right hand in the air. 'Yeah,' he said. 'Go the A team.'

Troy raised an eyebrow. 'Really?'

Tag covered his embarrassment by gently pushing Em out of the room. 'Come on, girly,' he mumbled. 'Time to rest up. We can discuss this all later.'

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Chapter 37

It was fully two weeks before Emily got the call.

A Guardian by the name of Rockstill who lived on the church spire in the village of Damerham contacted her with the news that a pair of vamps were cruising the village. They were simply walking around, peering into windows and gardens, sticking to the shadows but also ensuring that they could be seen.

Emily consulted the map.

'Right,' she shouted. 'Ten minutes tops. Let's go.'

The team piled into the Landrover Discovery, flipping down the rearmost seats so that they could all fit in.

William and Troy carried no weapons. Their teeth and claws were enough. Sylvian carried his customary rapier. Bastian had his katana, heavy daggers and throwing knives and Emily had her axe, although it wasn't yet visible.

Tag looked like Robocop. He had a Mil-Tech tactical vest with every accessory that he could find clipped on to it. Extra magazines for his two MP5 submachine guns. Six of the Prof's special silver charged grenades. Two cans of silver-nitrate aerosol spray that the Prof had recently perfected. A Cold Steel machete that had been silver-coated and a Desert Eagle .50 caliber pistol with an extended magazine capable of carrying ten rounds.

On his thighs he had another two heavy daggers and each boot had a back up pistol in .45 Colt APC with five rounds in a boot holster.

Finally, hanging from his neck, a large silver crucifix and a vial of holy water.

Sylvian smirked and pointed at the holy relics. 'Those don't work,' he said. 'It's a myth.'

'Says who?' Asked Tag.

'Everyone.'

'Well maybe everyone is wrong,' snapped Tag. 'Anyway, I believe in them and that's good enough for me.'

Sylvian grinned. 'That's cool,' he said as he climbed into the car.

William drove, pushing the SUV to its limits, making the trip in just under eight minutes. He eschewed stealth and caution and simply drove into the center of the village as fast as he could, screeching to a halt as they all barreled out.

The theory being that they didn't plan to sneak up on the vamps at any rate so they may as well make an entrance.

‘Where are they?’ Pulsed Emily at the Guardian.

‘Two roads down,’ answered Rockstill. ‘Tree lined avenue called Byers Lane.’

Emily pointed. ‘Down there,’ she said to the team. ‘A tree lined avenue. Ten to one the other vamps are waiting in the trees. Let’s go and spring the trap.’

‘Hold on,’ interjected Tag. ‘Let me take point. See if I can thin the tree climbing leeches out a bit.’

William nodded and they set of at a sprint, Troy and William changing as they did. Emily noted with a shock that Troy had changed into a half wolf half man just like William. According to the Pack, the Omega was the only one capable of doing that.

But there was no time to speculate as they arrived at the entrance to Byers Lane.

Tag waved them back. Then he took an MP5 in each hand, flipped the safeties of, pointed at the treetops and opened up. Sixty silver tipped rounds tore through the foliage and immediately two vamps dropped from the branches, their bodies limp as they struck the ground. As the submachine guns ran dry, Tag dropped them, pulled out two grenades, slipped the pins and threw them into the trees. The evening sky lit up as the two explosions rocked the night air. Another vamp fell from the trees and the rest of the team charged.

The vamps were definitely of a superior cast to any that Emily had faced before but they were disorientated from the massive amount of firepower that Tag had laid down and they were also facing a team of the deadliest warriors on the planet.

Emily held out her hand and willed Deathwalker into it, spinning her arm as the axe materialized and lopping of a vamps head as easily as she was pruning a geranium. She turned and dispatched a second blood sucker just as easily and then started looking for the next.

Troy and William simply ripped their opposition to shreds with tooth and claw. Bastian danced his dance of death and Sylvian leapt in and out, his rapier cutting and stabbing as he did.

‘Leave one alive,’ shouted William, his voice a guttural growl.

The team stopped fighting, however it looked as though William’s command had come too late.

But then Em looked over to see that one of the blood suckers had a hold of Tag. His talons were wrapped around the big man’s throat and the vamp was poised ready to slash his arteries open.

‘Don’t move,’ shouted the blood sucker. ‘If any of you come any closer I shall kill your friend.’

Sylvian shrugged. ‘Go ahead. We don’t really care.’

‘Hey,’ objected Tag. ‘Thanks a lot.’

‘Well, it’s not as though you’ll be permanently inconvenienced,’

quipped the Bloodborn.

'True,' admitted Tag. 'But it still really hurts.'

'Shut up,' screeched the vampire. 'Stop talking. I'll kill him. I swear.'

'Well could you hurry,' said William. 'We've all got stuff to do.'

The vampires face was a picture of bafflement as he desperately tried to work out why his threats were simply not fazing anyone.

'Look here,' he continued. 'There's no need to carry on like this. I have a message for you.'

'What?' Asked William.

'It's for a Miss Emily Hawk,' continued the vamp. 'Can you assure me that she will get the message?'

Emily stepped forward. 'I'm Emily Hawk. Talk to me.'

'We have your parents,' blurted the vampire. 'If you want them to live you will show yourself at Braithwaite Manor outside Dover tomorrow night, after nightfall. Come alone or they die. Arrive late and they die. Bring anyone with and they die.'

Emily went pale as the enormity of the message hit her. She turned to William. 'Braithwaite Manor. Do you know it?'

The Wolfman nodded. 'Old cold war facility. Thought that it had fallen to wrack and ruin.'

'Okay, I'll be there,' said Em. 'Now let Tag go and we won't harm you.'

The vamp let him go and the big man expelled a sigh of relief. But before Tag could move the vampire whipped his taloned right hand up and tore out the big man's throat. Blood gouted high into the air and Tag's lifeless body fell to the floor.

'That was simply a warning as to what will happen to your parents if you do not do exactly as you have been told,' shouted the vamp. 'They shall die in agony like your friend.'

'Or not,' said Tag as he stood up, his throat already healed.

The vampire stared at him in absolute surprise.

'But how? That's impossible.' He said.

Tag smiled as he drew his Desert Eagle. 'Apparently not.' He said as he unloaded the entire magazine into the vampires face.

'Come on,' said Emily. 'Enough messing about. We've got plans to make. Let's move.'

The team sprinted back to the car.

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Chapter 38

Emily had wanted to go and find her parents as soon as they had arrived back at William's forest lodge but eventually Merlin had talked her down, insisting that they all rest and attack the problem in the morning.

And so she waited, sitting in the kitchen with a mug of black coffee, waiting for the others to arrive.

Troy walked in first, greeted her and poured himself a coffee.

'Last night,' started Em.

'Yeah,' answered the young wolf before she could even finish the unasked question. 'I know what you're going to say. How did I assume the Wolfman form? Only the Omega can do that.'

Em nodded.

'To be honest, I have no idea,' said Troy. 'I simply thought that would be the best way to fight, you know, hands, claws, jaws. The whole deal. More efficient than just jaws and claws. The next thing, there I was. Full on Wolfman as opposed to my usual wolf form.'

'You reckon that it's got something to do with being dead. Charon. Something like that?' Mused Em.

'No,' said William as he walked in. 'Contrary to popular belief, other werewolves beside the Omega can assume half wolf half man form. It's just very unusual.' He proceeded to fix himself a cup of tea. 'However, I suppose that in a way you might be right,' he continued. 'The trauma of death, as it were, could have hastened the change.'

'Will I be able to do it again?' Asked Troy.

'Sure,' affirmed William. 'It's who you are.'

The rest of the team arrived in a group, including Merlin but not the Morrigan.

Tag and Bastian started to prepare breakfast. Eggs, bacon, sausage and heaping piles of toast.

As they finished eating there was a shimmer of blue light and the crow that was the Morrigan appeared in the room and immediately morphed into the woman. She sat down at the table and accepted a mug of Tag's terrible tea.

'I've done two things tonight,' said the goddess. 'Firstly, I pulled in some favors with one of my compatriots and asked him to check if Emily's parents were, in fact, gone. I am sorry,' she continued. 'They most definitely are. Secondly, I have just been flying over Braithwaite Manor,' she said. 'Interesting. It's been totally refurbished. I only

managed to take a peek into some of the windows and scouted around the outside, so couldn't see much. But one thing was obvious. There are at least a couple of hundred familiars living in barracks outside the main buildings. Servants in the whole, I assume. The windows are all covered in thick drapes to prevent the sunlight penetrating but the few glimpses that I got confirm that there are at least a hundred vamps living there. It seems to be some sort of vampire training camp. A sort of SAS for blood suckers.'

'Not good,' said William. 'What's the security like? Any points of ingress?'

The Morrigan nodded. 'Actually the security seems pretty lax. The windows aren't barred or locked. There are a multitude of doors that grant access to the inside of the building and I didn't see any sentries on the roof or even patrolling the grounds. These new vampires may be hot stuff but they obviously still suffer from the same sense of overweening self confidence and arrogance. So,' she continued. 'What's the plan?'

'We haven't got one yet,' admitted William. 'Although, as soon as we got back last night I contacted the Pack. As we speak they are all on the way. ETA from one hour to three hours. I also called in some favors and a truck load of ammunition and ordnance will be arriving within the hour. Thank god the minister of defense is an old friend.'

'What sort of ordnance are we talking?' Asked Bastian.

'L58A2 assault rifles with underslung grenade launchers. Minimi light machine guns. 60mm mortars. I put in a request for a couple of Heckler and Koch GMG's or Grenade Machine Guns. If they arrive then that'll give us some serious suppression capabilities. Obviously we didn't have time to manufacture enough silver ammunition but the Prof has come up with a highly concentrated spray solution of colloidal silver that we will use on all of the ammunition.'

'Cool,' said Tag with a grin. 'I like, big time.'

***

By five o'clock that afternoon the convoy was ready to roll.

The weapons had been distributed, ammunition issued and specific tasks allocated. William, Emily, Tag, Bastian, Sylvian and Troy travelled in one of the Landrover Discovery's and the rest of the task force spread themselves out amongst the rest of the vehicles. Merlin stayed behind with the Morrigan.

All in all there were eighteen wolves and ninety Purebloods.

With enough firepower to conduct a full scale war.

Once again, William drove the lead Landrover. Em rode shotgun in the other front seat.

'We're making the classic error when it comes to vampire hunting,'

said Bastian from the second row of seats.

'What's that?' Asked William.

'Racing the sun,' answered Bastian. 'Always arrive at sun up, never sun down. Basic rule.'

'I know,' agreed William. 'But we had no choice. Their big honcho wanted Em there tonight at twelve bells or he'll kill her parents. So we've got to go. If it's any consolation, we should get there just before eight o'clock. So we'll hit them a few hours earlier than they expect. Also, I'm hoping that they aren't expecting a full scale invasion. My feeling is that they'll reckon on Em and a small crack team. Not our entire force.'

'True,' said Bastian. 'We should provide them with a few surprises tonight.'

They drove for a while more until William glanced at Emily.

'We need to talk,' he said. His voice gentle.

Em nodded.

'Look, Em, we don't know who's in charge there but we can assume that he's some ancient psychotic blood sucker who has taken it into his mind that you are the beginning and end of his problem. So, whatever happens, he's going to try to kill you. And I'm sure that every vamp there has been tasked with bringing you down.'

'Not a problem,' answered Em. 'The more the merrier.'

'Yeah,' said William. 'But there's more. About your parents.'

'I know,' interrupted Emily as she dashed away a single tear that had escaped and slid down her cheek. 'There's every chance that they're already dead. Or if not, whoever is behind this is going to off them as soon as.'

'I'm sorry,' said William. 'Truly I am. But rest assured that we will do all that we can to rescue them.'

Emily turned in her seat to face the rest of the team. 'Guys,' she said. 'If my parents have been bitten, please all promise me that you'll do the right thing? Promise that you'll give them peace. Becoming a bloodsucker would be their worst nightmare.'

There was a mumble of agreement from the occupants and Emily nodded her thanks.

'The same goes for all of us,' added Bastian. 'Rather dead than un-dead. I get bitten then one of you guys had better take me out.'

Again everyone agreed.

The next couple of hours were spent in somber silence as they drew ever closer to their destination.

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Chapter 39

William had fought in more wars than he cared to remember. From battles with armored knights on horseback to the thin red line with musket loaders. Both World Wars, Korea, Vietnam and a few more sinister scuffles since.

And always for the same reason. Ultimately he was fighting the darkness. Vampires. And in all that time, if he had learned one thing, it was they were amoralistic liars.

Unlike Em, William was under no illusion that her parents would be left alive, no matter what the outcome of tonight's excursion might be. In fact, he would be surprised if they weren't already dead. Or worse…turned. After all – they only had some random vamps word that they were still alive.

With his conclusions in mind he decided to have a quick chat to Emily before it all went down. Although he had already broached the subject he felt that it was important enough to reinforce what he felt. The last thing that he wanted was to hurt the young Shadowhunter, but he also needed her to realize how slim the chances were of rescuing her parents. He also wanted her to know that he and her friends would do everything that they could to help her.

She was standing on one of the two small hillocks that overlooked the huge pale stone building that they were about to attack. Next to her were two Purebloods who were in the process of setting up the GMG, Grenade Machine Gun.

William had tasked two teams as bombardment and fire support. The one team he had placed on hillock one with the grenade launcher and the second team was on hillock two with a brace of 60mm mortars and a 7.62mm squad support machine gun.

The plan was relatively simple. They would fire grenades through the entire set of upper floor windows while, at the same time, rain down a few mortar bombs onto the roof. The emplaced 7.62mm would mop up anyone who attempted to escape the building.

Emily had been worried about collateral damage, specifically regarding her parents but both William and Sylvian had convinced her that there was little chance of her parents being imprisoned in one of the upper floor rooms. None of the windows had any bars on and it was logical that, to keep a man like Bart imprisoned, one would have to have a secure barred room or a room with no outside window.

Eventually Em had agreed.

The second part of the attack simply involved the wolves and the Purebloods advancing on foot, smashing their way into the head quarters and killing everything inside.

'Emily,' said William, his voice low. 'Just before we go in…'

'I know,' interrupted the young girl. 'I'm hopeful but I know what the odds are that Bart and Ryoko are still alive. After all, these things are pure evil. But if they are alive, we'll find them and we'll save them.' She turned to William and gave him a smile. 'Thank you.'

The wolf man squeezed her shoulder.

Then he turned to the men operating the GMG. 'Right, boys,' he said. 'Wait for us to form up on that open stretch of meadow and then rain down some fire.'

Em and William ran down the hill towards the area of open ground that they had designated as the staging area, some two hundred yards from the front of the building. It took them mere seconds to get there and by the time they did the troops were formed up, ready to go.

The GMG opened up with an odd pop and whistle sound. More like a fairground attraction than a tool of death. But when the explosive rounds struck home, all such comparisons were immediately dispelled.

The ground shook as the grenades exploded, shattering windows and sending plumes of fire billowing out of the building.

Then the mortars joined in. Large parts of the roof of the vampire headquarters exploded into the air, distributing chunks of stone and steel scattering it about like shrapnel.

Finally, as both vamps and familiars started to run from the building, the machine gun opened up. An insane hammering that spewed out silver tipped death at the rate of seven hundred rounds a minute.

William tore his clothes off and morphed into his Wolfman mode.

Then he threw back his head, roared and charged.

As one everyone joined him, the wolves morphing as they ran. As the group of attackers approached the building they split up. Some running around to the rear entrance and other smaller groups entering through the myriads of side doors and large bay windows. In under two minutes most of the wolves and Purebloods were in the building and engaged in combat with the vamps.

Emily went in through the front door, Deathwalker in her hand as she ran. Flanking her were the hulking figures of Troy and William, both in Wolfman form. At her heels ran Tag, his MP5 submachine guns at the ready. Sylvian and Bastian ranged wider, using their swords to cut down any vampires that attacked from the fringes.

The trio of Emily and the two wolfmen were like a battering ram. There was no subtlety in the way that they fought. With tooth and claw and whispering axe they tore the attacking Bloodwraiths to shreds as fast as they appeared.

All through the building they could hear the chattering of assault rifles combined with the tearing rip of machine gun fire and the dull booms of grenades.

But the rest of the attackers were not making such efficient headway as Emily's group. The Bloodwraiths were faster, stronger and better trained than anything that the wolves or Purebloods had ever faced before and the difference was telling.

Gunfire missed its marks and grenades exploded in empty rooms as the Bloodwraiths moved at blisteringly fast speeds. So quick as to appear and disappear like a magicians conjuring trick.

Tag was having a little more luck as he would use both of his guns at once, firing at the target and at the same time anticipating where the vamp would move to. As a result, the vamp would accelerate away from the initial burst of fire and run straight into the second.

Emily winked at the big man and then nodded her approval of his technique as she lopped off another vamps head.

As a group they moved swiftly from room to room, pushing deeper into the interior as they looked for Emily's foster parents.

They came to a large oak and iron door that was locked and bolted from the outside. Emily unlocked it and went through into a small reception area, followed by the rest of her team. Beyond that was another room with a barred door.

And inside the room stood two people.

Bart and Ryoko.

And they were both drenched in blood.

Emily gave a whoop of joy as she ran up to the door but before she could say anything Bart shook his head.

'I'm so sorry, my darling girl,' he said. His voice only a little above a whisper.

It was only then Emily saw why they were covered in blood. Both of them had been bitten in the neck. Deep savage wounds that, if left would certainly result in them bleeding to death.

'No,' shouted Emily. 'Please.'

Bart smiled. 'They bit us just before you attacked. They had no intention of letting us live. I am so sorry. We tried to escape, really, we tried so hard.'

Ryoko said nothing, she simply stared at Emily, her eyes filled with a mixture of regret and horror at what had just happened to them.

'But maybe you won't turn,' pleaded Emily. 'You never know.'

'You always know,' said Bart. Then he looked at Tag, noting his MP5 machine guns. 'I wonder, sir,' he said. 'You seem to be the only one here with a firearm. Could you do the honors?'

Tag nodded and stepped forward.

Emily screamed wordlessly and ran from the room and into the

corridor. The team let her go, knowing that she needed at least a few seconds alone to cope with the terrible enormity of what was happening.

Emily heard Tag's machine guns stutter. Two short bursts that released her parents as it simultaneously tore her heart apart.

Her legs went as soft as rubber and she slid slowly down the wall, weeping softly as all light vanished from her soul.

'Well that just sucks, doesn't it?' Said someone in a voice that was all too familiar.

Emily looked up. 'Nathan?'

He smiled.

Em did a double take. 'What? Are you here to help? How did you…'

Nathan's lips peeled back and his fangs extruded, glinting in the overhead lights.

Emily shuddered and started to move, standing as fast as she could. But it felt as if she were trying to move through jello, her movements slow and surreal as shock slowed her reactions to that of a normal person's.

She felt Nathan's fangs rip into her neck.

She felt his talons slice her back and face as he clawed at her.

She felt the warm blood pump from her ruined throat as she slid to the ground.

She felt her heart slow and stop as her body ran out of blood.

And she felt her life leave her as she stopped breathing.

The last thing that she heard was Nathan's voice as he whispered into her ear.

'Not so special now are you? Bitch!'

And the world went dark.

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Emily Shadowhunter - Book 3: BITTEN

Screams break the silence
Waking from the dead of night
Vengeance is boiling
He's returned to kill the light

Ozzy Osbourne – Bark at the Moon (1983)

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Chapter 1

Tag held Emily's body tight to his chest as he ran.

Troy and William cleared the way for him, using their massive jaws and Wolfman enhanced strength to obliterate any Vampires that dared to impede their progress. Bringing up the rear and discouraging any followers were Bastian and Sylvian, using their swords to kill and maim any blood suckers that came too close.

All about them lay the bodies of the fallen. Scores of both Purebloods and Vampires, hundreds of Familiars and even a few Wolves.

But the battle was all but over. The Bloodwraiths had proven both too numerous and too powerful for William and his Pack. And although the Pack had taken out at least fifty Vamps and two hundred Familiars it had been for the loss of most of the SAS Purebloods and at least three Wolves.

It could be considered a Pyrrhic victory at best - an outright loss at worst.

And now it was time to retreat.

For, with Emily gone, the Pack had lost their will to continue the fight. The enormity of their loss was simply too much to handle. Too much to assimilate.

Their talisman was no more.

It was over.

The remaining Wolves and Purebloods jumped into their SUV's, fired up the engines and pulled out, heading for the highway. Heading back to Williams forest retreat.

And in the back seat of the Landrover Tag clutched the young teenager's body tightly as he shook with emotion, tears running unashamedly down his cheeks.

He had failed her.

His only reason to exist was to ensure that Emily Hawk, Shadowhunter, lived.

And he had failed.

In fact he had done worse than fail to keep her alive. He had allowed her to be bitten. And now it was only a matter of hours before she reanimated as a new member of the family of the undead.

A newly born *Nosferatu*.

And then Tag would have to kill her all over again. It was what she

wanted.

It was what they all wanted.

Rather a corpse than a Vampire be.

***

It had taken just over two hours to return home and now the survivors were ensconced back in their forest retreat. The Pack and the Purebloods were resting. There were no wounded to speak of as anyone who had been bitten by a Vampire had, of necessity, been dispatched in order to prevent them from turning.

Except for Emily.

Tag still held her tightly to his chest, his face a picture of desolation.

William walked over to him. 'Listen, big man,' he said. 'You have to let her go.'

Tag shook his head. 'You all just want to kill her.'

'No,' denied William. 'She is already dead. You know that. We need to give her peace before she turns. And we need to do it soon. Time is running short.'

The big man drew his MP5 machine gun. 'I swear, if any of you touch her I'll fill you with lead.'

William held his hands up. 'My friend,' he said, his voice gruff with emotion. 'We all loved Emily. This is literally tearing me apart, I honestly do not know how I can continue, but I must. We must. And we all made a promise to each other. If any of us was bitten – do not let us turn. We gave an oath.'

'No,' shouted Tag. 'Fetch Merlin.' He waved his gun at William and Bastian and Sylvian. 'Do it.'

But there was no need as the magician opened the sitting room door and strode in, assessing the situation with one quick glance. 'Oh my god,' he said. 'How did this happen?'

William told him about Em's parents, how she had rushed from the room and by the time they got to her she had already been bitten.

Merlin's eyes flashed with both anger and infinite sadness. 'Tag,' he said. 'You must release her.'

Once again the big man shook his head. 'You got bitten and didn't turn.'

'I'm not altogether human,' said Merlin. 'It's different.'

'Neither is Emily,' insisted Tag. 'She's strong. She's brave. She has already cheated death once and she can do it again.'

Merlin leaned forward and touched Emily's forehead. Then he closed his eyes and concentrated. Slowly a blue nimbus formed round her head, a light so faint as to almost not exist. 'There is something,' admitted the magician. 'But I fear that it is merely the change imitating actual life. Her soul has gone and, without it, she will have

no conscience, no morality. No love. She will no longer be Emily. The thing that she will have become will be driven solely by the overwhelming need to feed. The desire for human blood will be her everything.' He looked directly at Tag, his eyes a window to his sorrow. 'You must release her,' he urged. 'It's what she would want.'

'It's too late,' said Sylvian as he pointed at Emily.

Her eyes flew open and she tore herself from Tag's embrace, throwing him backwards over the sofa as she jumped to her feet.

Both Bastian and Sylvian drew their swords and William's claws extended as he part morphed into Wolf mode.

Tag clambered back up and pointed his submachine gun at the three men.

All stood in silence as Emily/Vampire stood motionless; her eyes glowed deep red and her lips pulled back in a snarl to reveal two long canines that glistened in the overhead light. Her chest rose and fell as she panted like she had just run a marathon and her hands sprouted three inch long talons.

And still no one moved.

The door burst open and Troy and the Prof strode in. The young Wolf took one look at Emily/Vampire and swore.

'Oh, shit.'

'And then some,' agreed Bastian.

Emily/Vampire growled at the two newcomers and snapped her fangs together.

'Em,' said Troy. 'It's me.'

'Do you no good, youngster,' said Merlin. 'She's no longer Emily, so stand back.'

Still no one moved. Swords remained drawn and Tag's weapon remained pointed at his friends.

The Vampire closed her eyes and, slowly, her breathing slowed to a normal rate.

And when she opened her eyes they were no longer red but instead were her usual bright blue.

She looked at her friends and her expression was one of absolute tragedy.

'It hurts,' she whispered. 'It hurts so much.'

Tag made a movement towards her but she held up her hand. 'No. Don't get too close,' she said. Her voice still little above a ragged whisper. 'I don't know if I can control myself.'

'You can do it, Em,' urged Troy.

She shook her head. 'I can hear your hearts beating.' She shuddered. 'I can hear the blood pumping through your veins. I can smell it.' Tears rolled down her cheeks. 'Oh God,' she exclaimed. 'Please help me.'

The air shimmered and the Morrigan appeared, morphing from crow to human form as she arrived. She instantly took in the scene and turned to Merlin. ‘Why haven’t you released her?’ She asked.

Tag waved his gun. ‘Don’t you go there, mama,’ he said. ‘Over my dead body.’

The goddess raised an eyebrow and nodded. ‘Loyalty,’ she said. ‘A good trait.’ Then she sneered. ‘For a dog.’

‘Whatever,’ snapped Tag. ‘It is what it is. No one touches her.’

‘A bit late to start protecting her now,’ retaliated the Morrigan. ‘Perhaps it’s something that you should have done earlier, then we wouldn’t be in this position.’

A tear rolled down Tags face but he said nothing as he kept his submachine gun trained on his friends.

Emily dropped to one knee, her body shaking violently as she fought against her overwhelming thirst for human blood.

‘She needs to feed,’ stated the Prof.

‘Oh really?’ Snapped the Morrigan. ‘An intellect the size of a planet and that’s all you can come up with?’

The Prof glared at the goddess. ‘Please, women,’ he answered. ‘I’m theorizing.’ He turned to Tag. ‘My boy,’ he said, his voice low and reassuring. ‘Offer yourself to her.’

Tag shook his head.

‘But she needs to feed. If she doesn’t then she will expire. And she shall do so very quickly. Or worse, she will attack us.’

‘But then I’ll also be turned,’ argued the big man.

The Prof shook his head. ‘I don’t think so,’ he said. ‘You cannot be killed. To be turned you have to die. I’m not saying that it’ll be pleasant but you should survive with your humanity intact.’

‘You sure?’

The Prof shrugged. ‘Relatively sure.’

‘Good enough for me,’ said Tag as he dropped his gun and tore off his body armor and shirt. He walked over to the Vampire. ‘Hey, girly,’ he said. ‘Tag’s here. Time to feed.’

Emily/Vampire looked up at the big man and shook her head.

‘Come on,’ he insisted. ‘The Prof said that I’ll be fine.’ He held his arm out, wrist upwards. Offering.

The Vampire took a deep shuddering breath and then launched herself at him and tore his throat out.

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Chapter 2

It was morning and although all of the drapes were drawn tightly shut, Emily stood in the corner of the darkened room, avoiding even the faintest hint of sunlight. Her combat shirt was covered in drying blood and a streak of red painted her right cheek from lips to ear.

Tag lay on the sofa. He too was covered in blood and his eyes were ringed with dark circles. A stark reminder of the shock and pain that he had just endured.

But Emily/Vampire was still alive and for that the big man was thankful.

'I'm a Vampire,' said Emily.

No one answered her statement and the tragic awkwardness of the situation hung in the room like a gibbet.

'Why didn't you kill me?' She asked.

'Tag wouldn't let is,' answered William.

Emily looked at the big man. 'Why?'

Tag simply shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. Emily walked over to him and put her hand on his shoulder. 'I'm sorry if I hurt you,' she whispered.

The big man flinched at her touch but didn't pull away.

Tears rolled down Emily's face. 'What am I going to do?' She asked everyone and no one.

'Survive,' answered Sylvian. 'I can teach you how to avoid the sun. How to run your life. As for the need for blood…'

'She can feed on me,' said Tag. 'And when we go hunting for Vamps then she can drain those suckers dry.'

'Will you still hunt?' Asked Sylvian. 'Or are you part of them now?'

Emily bared her fangs. 'They killed my parents,' she said. 'They turned me into this. I will not rest until every last one of them has been exterminated.'

William nodded his approval. 'Good,' he said. 'Because there will be many more battles. But first we need to recover. This one did not go well for us. Those Vamps were different. I'm not sure how or why but they were far superior to anything that I have ever faced before.'

'I know why,' said Emily, her face a mask of anger. 'Nathan Tremblay.'

'What?' Exclaimed Bastian and Merlin together.

'Nathan,' repeated Emily. 'He has turned. It was he who bit me. It

was he who ordered the death of my parents. He is the one who is responsible for this new breed of blood sucker. We should have realized when we first saw them fighting. Just like us. Just like Shadowhunters. Nathan, bloody, Tremblay.'

'He's a dead man,' shouted Bastian. 'And to think that I called him friend. I'm going to kill him.'

'Back of the queue,' stated Emily. 'I get him first.'

'Fine,' said Sylvian. 'You get the traitor. But for now you need to rest. That's the first thing that you need to get used to. From now on you sleep in the day and stay up at night. The darkness is your friend. Which is not all bad because that's when the enemy is awake. Come on.'

Sylvian held out his hand. Emily took it and allowed herself to be led from the room, closing the door behind her as she left.

The Morrigan spoke first. 'She is a Vampire. We cannot allow her to live. Never before has a blood sucker been trusted, and with good reason. She no longer has a soul therefore she is no longer capable of moral thought.''

Tag sighed, too exhausted to show his anger. 'Leave it out, mama,' he said. 'I've already told you. She stays.'

The Morrigan looked at Merlin, her expression quizzical.

'I'm inclined to agree with Tag on this one,' said the magician. 'I felt something. A tiny spark but nevertheless, there is something. Emily is different. Powerful beyond any Shadowhunter that I have ever encountered. She has visited the realm of Charon and returned. Perhaps she will survive this. I counsel that we wait and see.' He looked around the room. 'Are all in favor?'

Sylvian, Bastian and the Prof nodded. The Morrigan sneered and shook her head.

'What he said,' mumbled Tag as he stood up. 'Now let me sleep, I'm finished. Wake me up if Emily needs me.'

***

Emily sat on the edge of her bed. Sylvian had ensured that the drapes were drawn tight and then he had hung some blankets over them just in case. The room was darker than a moonlit winter night but Emily could see perfectly. As a Shadowhunter her night vision was enhanced but now it was off the charts. To her the pitch black room was as bright as twilight.

She was utterly exhausted but she knew that sleep wouldn't come. Every time that she closed her eyes she saw Tag's face. His jaw tensed in a rictus of pain, his eyes wide with shock as she ravened on him, tearing at his throat with her fangs as her talons shredded the skin on his back and shoulders. And the way he had flinched when she had

touched him after he had recovered.

She was a monster.

But she was a monster with a purpose.

It was her fault that Bart and Ryoko were dead. They had been used as bait and she had failed to save them. There was nothing that she could do about that but, as all of the gods bore her witness, she would have her revenge.

Nathan Tremblay was a dead man. She would not rest until she found him. And then she would kill him and all those who followed him.

She would turn the nadir of her life into a positive. For now she was more powerful than ever and her power would become Nathan's bane.

Emily Hawk would let nothing stand in her way.

And finally, as the contemplation of revenge flamed so brightly in her mind that it burned away any thought of sorrow, she succumbed to her exhaustion and fell into a troubled sleep.

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Chapter 3

Lord Byron stood at the head of the gathering, flanked on both sides by six other elder brethren that could be construed as no less than a personal bodyguard.

In front of him stood Nathan Tremblay. Once more fulfilling the part of the accused.

Another hundred or so assorted elders filled the rest of the room.

There were no Bloodwraiths to be seen.

Byron didn't even attempt to keep the look of triumph from his face as he faced the ex-Shadowhunter.

'Once more you stand before us,' declaimed the lord. 'Accused and shamed. Brought to task for your participation in the death of over fifty of our finest. The willful and thoughtless destruction of half a hundred of our brethren for no reason other than your own personal vendetta.' Byron smirked at his audience. 'So, young Aspirant, what have you to say in your defense?'

Nathan looked round the room, his obvious scorn and distaste evident on his face for all to see.

And then he moved. Even to the gathered undead his reaction time was so fast as to be almost undetectable. To a human it would have simply looked as if he had teleported instantly from standing twenty feet in front of Lord Byron to standing directly behind him.

The sound of rending flesh filled the room as Nathan ripped Byron's head from his shoulders. Then the ex-Shadowhunter attacked the six bodyguards, slashing and biting and tearing at them with a violence that spoke of more than simply strength and speed and the need to subdue. It spoke also of the release of a vast well of violence. It spoke of the need to punish. It spoke of the need to display dominance. And it spoke of a desire for both bloodletting and brutality far beyond that of even the most rabid of the *Nosferatu*.

Some of the crowd of elders started to move forward to intervene but as they did so the doors and windows to the hall exploded inwards as over fifty Bloodwraiths burst in and quickly surrounded the crowd.

Nathan turned to the gathering. Blood and gore dripped from him, running in rivulets down his face and chest, painting him red and then splashing to the floor and spreading out into a puddle of deep crimson viscousness.

“When He broke the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, ‘Come.’ And another, a red horse, went out; and to him who sat on it, it was granted to take peace from the earth, and that men would slay one another.”

And he smiled. ‘You are all weak,’ said Nathan. ‘But you do not have to be. You whine over the fact that we have lost some of our finest… but you conveniently forget that we fought and defeated an attack from vastly overwhelming forces. Hundreds of Wolves and human Special Forces soldiers. For the loss of less than half of our number. And ultimately, we defeated them. We destroyed them. As we will destroy all who stand in our way.

Once again I say to you – our time has come. And from this night forth none shall remain unpledged. You are for me, or you are against me. I shall lead you into the shadows. Under a new moon we, the children of the night, shall prosper.’

Lord Tesla, an ancient and powerful elder who usually remained unseen, stepped forward. He was a manipulator but also a follower. ‘What of the *Capo*?’ He asked. ‘Has he approved?’

‘I will take care of the *Capo*,’ replied Nathan, his voice barely above a whisper. ‘All that you need to do is to do as I tell you. Will you follow?’

Lord Tesla took a knee. ‘Blood of my blood,’ he said. ‘I shall follow.’

As one the rest of the *Nosferatu* knelt before their new leader.

‘Blood of my blood. We shall follow.’

And Nathan smiled, his blood soaked lips pulling back to reveal his fangs.

‘Yes,’ he thought to himself. ‘It was time for him and his Bloodwraiths to travel to Italy. It was time to have a long chat with the *Capo*. It was time to show all of the brethren his plans for their future.

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Chapter 4

The sound of a heartbeat dragged Emily/Vampire from her troubled sleep. Not her own heartbeat…someone else's. She lay still for a while and attempted to detect her own and, just before she gave up, she noticed the faintest of murmurs. Like a bear in hibernation, its pulse slowed to a mere ten beats a minute.

She sat up and immediately the hunger hit her like a right hook. The sound of various heartbeats thundered in her head and the smell of blood assailed her nostrils. The hunger was more than just a simple need for sustenance. More than a physical need. It was a deep and unstoppable longing. Like her soul had been torn from her and only the consumption of human blood would bring it back, or at least fill the blackness that had been left behind.

She rocked back and forth, holding her head between her hands and squeezing as hard as she could in an attempt to gain control, keening softly as she did so.

There was a knock on the door and Tag walked in, his face showing his concern.

Emily flicked her head around. A lion about to take its prey down.

Tag stepped back but it was too late as Emily/Vampire launched herself across the room and latched onto his throat with her canines, savagely jerking her head from side to side as she sawed into his arteries and gulped down his blood.

Less than a minute later she cast him down and stared at the still body. And then, with a scream of disgust and self loathing, she ran from the room, sprinting through the kitchen and ripping open the door that led outside.

Sylvian shouted a warning but she paid him no heed as the abhorrence she felt due to her own actions drove her like a cattle-goad, spurring her to run from her inner turmoil.

It was only when she was actually outside that she realized that it was not quite yet twilight and a tiny sliver of red sun still poked above the horizon.

Immediately her exposed flesh burst into flame and the air was filled with the smell of burning flesh. She could vaguely hear Sylvian shouting for help as he too could not expose himself to UV light. She fell to her knees as more pain than she had ever before experienced washed over her. A veritable tsunami of agony poured through her,

scorching her every nerve ending and piercing her brain with a lance of white hot electric torture. It literally felt as though her blood had turned to molten lava in her veins.

She felt someone pick her up and, as they did so, their clothes also caught alight, but whoever it was ignored the flames and ran inside with her in their arms. As they got out of the sun, Sylvian wrapped a blanket around them to smother the flames.

She was lowered gently to the floor and she looked up to see Troy above her, his face blistered and his hair burned short.

But as she looked, his hair grew back and the blisters on his face started to heal. At the same time she could feel herself healing, the ravaged flesh filling out and the skin re-growing. Less than a minute later she was whole.

She stood, keeping the blanket wrapped around her as most of her clothes had burned off.

Sylvian shook his head. 'Well, Emily,' he said. 'I trust that we now see why I keep out of the sun?'

Emily smiled sheepishly. 'I didn't think,' she said. 'I just wanted to run. To get away.'

'Not possible,' countered Sylvian. 'You cannot run from yourself because, surprise, surprise, when you get wherever you are going you'll find that you're still there.'

Emily raised an eyebrow. 'That doesn't make sense.'

'Yes it does,' said Sylvian. 'You just have to think about it for a while.'

Tag walked into the kitchen and set about fixing a pot of tea, his blood soaked shirt hanging in tatters about his shoulders. Emily noticed that he avoided eye contact with her, looking at the floor whenever she came close. And that made her feel terrible. Once again tears started to flow as the awful enormity of what she had become threatened to overwhelm her but she blinked fast and forced them to stop.

The big man put a mug of tea on the table and gestured for her to sit down. Emily did so and raised the mug to her lips. But she couldn't take even a sip. The smell nauseated her and she started to gag. Obviously human blood was the only thing that could sustain her. The only thing that her body would accept.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

'Don't be,' said Tag. 'You poor thing. How you gonna live a full life without tea? That's like the saddest thing, man.'

Emily smiled weakly and Tag gave a thumb up. 'That's my girl,' he said encouragingly.

Merlin and William walked in and Troy told them about Emily's near miss with her sunlight excursion.

‘Are you okay?’ Asked Merlin.

Emily nodded, then she shook her head. ‘Yes. No. I don’t know,’ she answered. ‘What can I say? I have become one of the very monsters that I have sworn to kill. I am everything that disgusts me. Lower than the lowest form of life.’

‘No,’ disagreed the magician. ‘You are what you decide to be. You are the sum total of your deeds. Your actions will dictate if you are a monster, not your physiological status.’

‘Well at the moment my actions seem to dictate that I attack Tag every time that I’m hungry. I can’t stop myself, it’s like I’m no longer me.’

‘In many ways you aren’t,’ said Sylvian. ‘But the hunger will become less intense, or so I’ve heard. It will never stop but you will feel the need to feed much less frequently.’

‘Good to that,’ said Tag. ‘I tell you, getting your throat torn out on a daily basis ain’t no sorta fun at all.’

‘Sorry,’ offered Emily, her voice small and quiet.

‘Ain’t nothing to be sorry about,’ answered Tag. ‘Ain’t be your fault that you got bit. It be my fault. Just saying, that’s all, the neck thing stings a bit.’

‘When can we start hunting the enemy again?’ Asked Emily.

‘We need to formulate some sort of plan first,’ answered William. ‘We took a savage beating in our last encounter. Lost most of the Purebloods plus three Wolves. I’ve already sent a few Pack members to scout out the manor house and they have reported that the Vamps have vacated it completely. No idea where they all went. But one thing is for sure, we dealt them a heavy blow so I doubt that they’ll be very active for a while.’

Emily shook her head. ‘They will be active sooner than you think. Firstly, they have to feed and, secondly, you should have seen Nathan. He’s obsessed. I could see the fire of ambition burning in his eyes. The hatred for humanity and the way that he thinks that he’d been treated.’

‘What do you mean?’ Asked Merlin. ‘He was treated the same as every other Shadowhunter, with respect and friendship.’

‘Not the way that he saw it,’ said Em. ‘He saw himself being sidelined. Losing the power that he once wielded. Also he saw me as part of the usurping of that power. And trust me, he is going to do anything that it takes to become a major force in the world. I would bet my bottom dollar that, right now, he is preparing to further his plans.’

‘Well then perhaps the only thing that we can do is react,’ said William. ‘Wait and see what happens next and then make a plan.’

‘No,’ shouted Emily as she stood up. ‘We can’t wait. We need to

attack. To kill. We need to hunt.' She smashed her fist down on the kitchen table splitting the two inch thick ancient Oak as she did. Her eyes glowed red and her fangs protruded as she held her fist out in front of her. 'They must all die. I shall rip them to shreds and rend their flesh.'

Sylvian took a step forward and slapped Emily hard across the face. She staggered back and growled.

'Control,' commanded the Frenchman. 'Respect yourself, Emily Hawk,' he continued. 'And respect those around you. Concentrate. You are stronger than this.'

Emily took a deep breath and calmed down. 'Sorry,' she said again. 'It's like something takes over. Any emotion turns into the need for blood and death. It's almost impossible to stop.'

'Almost,' said Sylvian. 'But you can do it.'

Emily nodded. 'I can at least try.'

Sylvian nodded. 'Good.'

The door banged open and the Prof strode in. He held up a bag. 'Here,' he said. 'Damned stupid of me not to have done this straight away. Sometimes the most obvious solutions can evade one. Wood for the trees type of thing.'

'What are you blathering about?' Demanded Merlin.

'This,' answered the Prof.' Bag of blood. Got it from one of the drivers. One hundred percent human. The Vampire girl can feed on this.'

'My name is Emily. Not Vampire girl.'

The Prof ignored Emily's correction as he offered her the IV bag. 'Try it,' he urged. 'Just use the IV line like a straw and suck the contents out. Hey presto – no problems.'

Emily lifted the bag tentatively to her mouth. Her lips closed around the tube and she sucked, grimaced and spat. A gob of blood hit the floor with a splat.

'Urgh! It's dead,' she said.

'What do you mean,' asked the Prof. 'I've just drawn it.'

Em shook her head. 'I'm sorry…but it's vile. Lifeless. I can't drink it.'

'But when we attacked the Vampires I saw a room full of bags of blood,' said William. 'They were drinking them. So why can't you?'

Emily shrugged.

'She's different,' said Merlin. 'She's a Shadowhunter.'

'So is Nathan.' Quipped William.

'Well maybe he can't drink donated blood either. But she's not Nathan. She has passed over to the realms of Charon and returned. Mayhap that makes a difference. Who knows? It's not like we have any precedents to work with here.'

'I heard that drinking dead blood can make Vamps real sick,'

interjected Tag.

'Really?' Asked Merlin. 'Where from?'

Tag looked down. 'Umm…Interview with a Vampire. You know, the Tom Cruise movie.'

Merlin shook his head. 'Really?'

Tag shrugged. 'Hey, it's a theory.'

'Can I go outside yet?' Asked Emily.

Sylvian nodded. 'I'll come with you.'

The two of them left the room and went outside. The sun had fully set and the forest was alive with the sound of the nocturnal creatures coming to life. Fireflies and Carabid beetles. Moths and owls, foxes and badgers.

Emily cocked her head to one side. 'Can you hear them?' She asked. 'The insects. The animals.'

Sylvian shook his head. 'Not as clearly as you.'

'Why? Aren't you a Vampire? Well, sort of a Vampire.'

'I'll let that one go,' said Sylvian. 'Considering the unique circumstances that we are in. But no, I am Bloodborn. Apart from the sun thing and the enhanced strength and longevity I am not sort of like a Vampire. The defining thing with a Vampire is their need for human blood. I prefer *Fois Gras* and *duck a l'orange*. Your senses are enhanced so that you can seek out life. You can sense the living whereas my senses are simply superhuman as opposed to supernatural.'

'So what you are saying,' responded Emily. 'Is that my senses have been heightened for one single purpose.'

'Yes,' agreed Sylvian. 'You are an entity that exists purely to kill and feed. It is your *raison d'être.*'

Emily sighed and scanned the forest around her, picking out the small scurrying animals as she did so. 'Let's walk,' she said.

The two of them wondered aimlessly through the forest, silent. Together but alone. Emily noticed that as she approached an area it went quiet as the living beings there went to ground and lay still. She commented on it to Sylvian.

He nodded. 'They sense the ultimate predator. So they hide.'

'But I wouldn't hurt them,' argued Emily. 'Anyway, hiding does them no good. I can still hear their heartbeats. Sense their blood.'

'Perhaps you wouldn't harm them,' shrugged the Frenchman. 'But they don't know that. They seek only to survive. If it makes you feel any better, the same thing happens to the Wolves. Where they go all other animals either hide or run. The difference being that if some errant badger or fox does challenge them they kill it. Very territorial our lupine brothers.'

Emily thought for a while. 'So have you ever seen a sunrise,' she

asked.

'Of course,' answered Sylvian. 'Well, strictly speaking, no. But I have seen movies, TV, photos.'

'Not the same, though.'

'I wouldn't know,' pointed out the Frenchman. 'I've been living a night time life for so long now, plus the fact that it's all that I've ever known. It's no big deal. I spent three years in Vegas once, never went outside except for moving to a new hotel, which I did at night.'

'Why?'

'Lot of Vamps in Vegas. Good hunting grounds.'

'But it's still very different for you,' noted Emily. 'As you say, apart from the sunlight thing you are ostensibly human. You eat human food, drink wine, coffee. When you enter a room you see people…I see dinner. It's overwhelming. The smell of blood, the pounding of their hearts.'

'It will lessen,' said Sylvian.

'To what extent?' Asked Emily.

'I don't know. All that I know is that you will gain some semblance of control over the hunger. Unless…' Sylvian left the rest of his sentence unsaid.

'Unless what,' asked Em.

Again the Frenchman shrugged in his characteristic way. 'Nothing. Conjecture.'

'Conjecture about what?'

'You are different. The whole ex-Shadowhunter, passing through Deaths realm. In all fairness, I have no real idea how things will change for you. You are stronger, faster. Perhaps your hunger is reflected in this. Perhaps you will always need to feed more desperately than a normal bloodsu…sorry…Vampire. I don't mean to be the harbinger of doom and despair but I believe that you prefer honesty to sugar-coating.'

'If something doesn't happen soon I don't know if I can continue,' said Emily. Her voice little more than a whisper. 'You don't know what it's like, Sylvian. I spend every waking moment hating what I have become and dreading the next time that Tag offers himself to me. I can't even remember feeding but I know that it must be terrible for him. He no longer looks me in the eye and he flinches from me whenever I get close to him.'

'He will be fine,' reassured Sylvian. 'He is strong, both mentally and physically. As are you.'

Emily shook her head. 'Not as strong as you think,' she said. 'If things don't change in the next few days…'

She didn't continue and Sylvian didn't push her as they turned for home, walking back in silence.

As they left the forest the night animals struck up their various choruses of life affirmation once again.

Relieved that the ultimate predator was no longer amongst them.

Happy to be left alive.

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Chapter 5

Wachmeister Dietz Muller of the Papal Guard navigated the twisting corridors with a speed that spoke of intimate knowledge. His rubber soled boots made no noise on the polished marble floors as he appeared to glide rather than step, such was the grace of his movements.

He was not wearing the usual Swiss Guard uniform of blue, red, orange and yellow that had been created in back in 1914. Nor had he donned the black tunic and red breaches of the Sergeant, or Wachmeister. Instead he wore a simple blue overall with a brown leather belt and brown boots.

He carried no visible weaponry.

Finally he came to a set of large double doors of thick Oak, the brass handle worn crooked from countless centuries of use, the wood almost black with age. He pushed them open and strode into a high ceilinged room with wood paneled walls and flagstone floor. Priceless ancient Turkish carpets covered most of the floor and the walls boasted various paintings of old masters. Da Vinci's, Bellini's and Donatello's. Unseen by public eye for many generations. Millions of Dollars of forgotten art in a room that perhaps twenty people a year frequented. The casual wealth of the Roman Catholic Church.

Muller walked over to the single large desk in the middle of the room, placed his hands on it as he leaned forward and demanded. 'I need to see Kaplan Abbiati immediately.'

The man sitting behind the desk didn't even bother to look up as he replied. 'You knock before you enter, sergeant. And when, or if, I give you permission, you address me as Hauptmann or Captain. Is that clear?'

Muller did not bat an eye and simple repeated his request, albeit in a slightly different format. 'It is imperative that I see the Chaplain in charge immediately.'

The captain banged his hands on his desk. 'Sergeant, you have been warned. Show some respect or I shall order you from this room.'

Muller reached across the desk, grabbed the captain's shirtfront and yanked him from his feet, dragging him across the desk so that his face was mere inches away. 'Listen to me, you insignificant little penpusher,' growled Muller as he grabbed his own collar and pushed it in front of the captain's eyeline, bringing his attention to a tiny

silver badge, so small as to be almost invisible unless viewed close up. 'Do you see that?'

The captain nodded.

'What is it?' Demanded Muller.

'Twin lightning bolts,' answered the captain, his voice hoarse with shock.

'And what does that stand for?' Continued Muller.

'*Sedes Sacrorum*.'

'So what does that mean?'

'It means that you are a Knight of the Holy See. You represent the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God.'

'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true,' intoned Muller. 'How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'

'I apologize' said the captain. 'I had no idea. I always assumed that you were a mere sergeant.'

'I am,' said Muller. 'Now tell the chaplain that I am here.'

Captain Benziger pushed his chair back, walked over to an inter-leading door, knocked and entered. Seconds later he exited. 'The Kaplan will see you now.'

He bowed as Muller walked past and entered the Chaplain's office, closing the door behind him.

Kaplan in charge, Chaplain Salvatore Abbiati, held the equivalent rank of a lieutenant colonel and was officially the second in charge of the Vatican's elite Swiss Guard. In reality, however, the power that the Kaplan wielded was second only to that of His Holiness, the Pope.

He stood at six feet six, rake thin, short steel gray hair and a nose like a hatchet. His deep blue eyes were serious to the point of somber and although his face bore many wrinkles there were no laughter lines. Only lines created by stress, worry and loss.

The overriding impression was of a man who had been fighting a war for many years with no respite. A strong man who was nearing the end of his strength but not his faith.

'I need more men,' demanded Muller. 'Mine are all dead.'

The Kaplan smiled. 'Hello, Kaplan Abbiati,' he said. 'How are you? So good to see you after almost three months.'

Muller did a subtle double take and then stuck his hand out. 'Sorry, Salvatore,' he said. 'It is good to see you, old friend. It's just that this job…well…you know.'

Kaplan Salvatore Abbiati nodded. 'The Lord will not give us tasks that we cannot fulfill, Dietz. Even though his road may be full of pain. Sit, please.'

The two men sat down, Salvatore Abbiati settling back into his chair with a sigh of relief while Dietz Muller perched on the edge of his

seat, his body a seething bundle of barely contained anger.

'So, Dietz, how goes the war?'

The Knight of the *Sedes Sacrorum* frowned. 'Not well. There has been a recent massive surge in enemy operations. Also, there appears to be a new breed coming to the fore. Savage. Focused. Unlike anything that we have ever encountered. In fact, over the last two weeks I have lost all three of my men. They were ambushed. It was a bloodbath. I need more bodies.'

The Kaplan leaned back in his chair and sighed. 'I am sorry to hear of their deaths, my friend,' he said. 'Truly I am. But replacing them is not that simple.'

'Of course it is,' responded Muller angrily. 'It's as simple as you wish it to be. You are the Kaplan. Your word is law.'

'No,' denied the Kaplan. 'His Holiness is the word of the Lord. Therefore what he says is the law.'

'And what does he say?' Asked Muller.

'He has made it plain that the church must no longer recognize the existence of the enemy.'

'That's preposterous,' argued Muller.

'It gets worse,' added the Kaplan.

'How could it?'

'His Holiness has gone further. In fact he has informed us that, not only must we not recognize the enemy, we must actually deny all existence of it. He claims that if we acknowledge that Vampires exist we would be strengthening the perceived power of Satan.'

'That is insane,' blurted Muller. 'They patently do exist. We have been at war with them for years.'

'Not according to His Holiness.'

'Well then his Holiness is wrong. For God's sake, Kaplan, what does he think that my men all die from? Suicide? Rare diseases that only affect the Knights of the Holy See?'

'Be very careful, sergeant,' warned the Kaplan. 'You flirt with blasphemy. His Holiness is chosen by God. He speaks with His voice. To deny him is to deny your God.'

Muller shut his eyes and took a deep breath. 'I apologize, Kaplan. I misspoke. I meant to say that, perhaps, His Holiness has not been properly informed and thus his decisions are based on faulty input.'

Kaplan Abbiati shook his head. 'I am sorry, my friend,' he said. 'On the plus side, I have not been told to officially close your section down, merely that I can no longer actively support you. This is all politics,' he continued. 'A year, may two or three and the winds will change. Why don't you use this time to take a break from all of the killing. The hardships. Come back to the Vatican on a permanent basis. Or, if you would prefer, I could get you a small church in a

remote village. You could tend to your parishioners. Go back to your roots.'

'I am a soldier of God,' answered Muller. 'A Knight of the Holy See. I live but to fight the good fight. And I cannot stress more vehemently, something bad is occurring. We are on the verge of a great happening. The brothers of darkness are multiplying as we speak. I fear for humanity, Salvatore. Truly I do.'

The Kaplan smiled. 'Humanity is always on the verge of destruction, Dietz,' he said. 'Take a year off. We will revisit this after that.'

Muller stood up. 'Kaplan, I am begging you. As a soldier of Christ and as an old friend. At least let me continue for the next few months.'

The Kaplan thought for a few seconds and then nodded. 'Why not? I can always simply say that you are wrapping things up.'

'Thank you, Kaplan,' said Muller as he headed for the door. He stopped just before he opened it. 'May I ask one last favor?'

The Kaplan nodded. 'You are pushing your luck, sergeant. What is it?'

'As I said, I have lost my men. I need reinforcements .'

The Kaplan shook his head. 'Absolutely out of the question. Obviously.'

'I cannot function alone. That truly would be suicide.'

'Then simply do not do it,' urged the Kaplan. 'Take the time off as I have asked you to.'

'You know that I must.'

The Kaplan squeezed the bridge of his nose with his right hand, his exhaustion evident on his face. 'How many?'

'Three.'

'One,' countered the Kaplan.

'Two?'

'No, sergeant,' insisted the Kaplan. 'One.'

'Fine,' conceded Muller. Then give me Otto Reynaud.'

The Kaplan laughed. But it was without humor. 'The Walloon?'

'Yes.'

'Are you truly insane, Dietz? The Walloon? You know as well as anyone that he is in jail awaiting trial for the crimes of Falsehood, Sedition and Blasphemy. As well as that he is well known for his violent and unpredictable tendencies.'

'Yes,' agreed Muller. 'But have you ever seen him fight?'

'Once,' admitted the Kaplan.

'And?'

'He is most likely the deadliest human being that I have ever seen. Barring you, of course.'

'I need him.'

The Kaplan nodded. 'Take him then. I shall let God decide his

punishment. Wait.' He walked over to his desk, grabbed a piece of official Vatican paper and wrote his order upon it. Muller continued to wait while the Kaplan took a nub of sealing wax out of his desk, melted it using a Zippo lighter and applied his official seal. He handed the document to the sergeant. 'Here, this will allow you to remove that madman from custody as well as give you access to your choice of weapons and permission to draw one hundred thousand Euros from the vaults. Fifty thousand in gold coin and the rest in cash.'

'Thank you, my friend,' said Muller as he took the document.

The Kaplan said nothing as he watched his old friend leave the room. After all, what could he say? He was convinced that he had literally just sent his friend to his death. And the fact that he had asked him to was no real consolation.

'God give him the strength to fight this fight...Please forgive him for his sins and wash him clean from the enemy's lie. In Jesus name amen.'

He closed the door.

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The official maps of the Vatican show that there are no dungeons, only two holding cells that are used by the internal police force prior to sending all criminals to prisons situated outside the Church State.

But then there are many things that are not on the official Vatican maps.

Sergeant Muller stood in the corridor that allowed access to the five dank rooms that made up the deep dungeon prison that lay under the floors of the cathedral. Opposite him stood the man that he had come to recruit.

Otto Reynaud. Originally of Walloon descent from Belgium although he had later assumed Swiss citizenship and joined the Swiss army so that he could qualify for incorporation into the Vatican guard. Prior to that he had fought for the French Foreign legion as well as spending a couple of years working for a South African mercenary outfit that went by the name of Executive Outcomes.

Six foot three, a shaved bullet shaped head, neck as thick as a bull's and massive shoulders that sloped down to a barrel chest and torso. His legs were like concrete pillars. It was a body built for strength and endurance, not looks. In fact Otto had never seen the inside of a gymnasium or fitness studio. Instead he had been forged in battle and annealed in the Spartan existence of the Church.

One of the jailers opened the steel door, using old fashioned keys as opposed to modern electronic locks. His hand hovered close to his sidearm, showing his obvious fear of the man locked inside the small stone walled cell.

Otto stared at the guard with a sneer of contempt, leaned towards him and, in a normal speaking volume said, Boo!

The guard stumbled back nervously, banging into the door as he did so.

Otto shook his head. 'Pathetic,' he rumbled. 'So,' he said as he transferred his attention to Sergeant Muller. 'What does a Knight of the Holy See need from me?'

'What makes you think I need anything from you, private?' Asked Muller as he dismissed the guard, sending him back to his reception area.

'I'm a known blasphemer; you religious fanatics wouldn't be seen dead with someone like me unless you wanted something. Who do you need killed?'

'I'm not a religious fanatic,' countered Muller.

Otto shrugged. 'But you still need me for something or you wouldn't have taken the trouble to get me sprung from here.'

'Yes,' admitted Muller. 'I'll get straight to the point, what do you know about Vampires?'

'They don't exist.'

'What if I told you that they do?'

Otto laughed. 'Not according to your big boss,' he said.

'He's your boss too,' pointed out Muller.

The big man shook his head. 'No,' he denied. 'He's simply and old man who puts doctrine before truth and expediency before faith. Anyway, I know about Vampires. When I was a small boy I lived with my grandparents in a little village outside of Rancenne. Farmers mainly, a few craftsmen. Cobbler, blacksmith, jeweler. A simple life. Probably seventy people in the whole village. And then one night the men found a young girl. Her throat had been torn out and she had been bled dry. But there was no blood around her. My grandfather knew straight away. No one believed him. Two weeks later it happened again. So the elders contacted the church. Two more young people died before three men arrived. Men like you. *Sedes Sacrorum*. They left before the end of the week. There were no more deaths. That was when I decided that I wanted to fight for the church. To be a soldier of God. A Vatican guard.' Otto rolled his massive shoulders, loosening the slabs of muscle. Like a boxer before a bout. 'As you can see,' he gestured towards the open cell door. 'Things didn't go quite as well as they might have.'

Muller held up the Kaplan's letter complete with official seal. 'This here is permission for your release, signed by the Kaplan. In return you will need to come with me.'

'Is it a full pardon?' Enquired Otto.

Muller shook his head. 'Afraid not. Simply permission to accompany

me on my mission.'

The big man raised an eyebrow. 'So, I assume that the Kaplan has little confidence in our survival.'

Muller nodded. 'It would be remiss of me to deny that. You will be free but I do fear that it may transpire that you are simply free to die. But, on the plus side, you will be dying whilst fighting on the side of our Lord.'

'Not according to His Holiness,' snapped Otto. 'He has made it plain that Vampires do not exist. And to deny him…'

'Is to deny God. Yes, I know,' retaliated Muller.

Otto grinned. Somehow the expression made him look even more dangerous. 'Whatever,' he said. 'I'm with you. I didn't join this outfit to languish on prison cells whilst a feeble old man dictates the survival of our holy mother church. I joined to fight the good fight.'

Muller held out his hand. The two shook and then walked from the room. Otto didn't even pause to insult the guard on the way out.

They made their way confidently through the maze of corridors that made up the inner sanctums of the Vatican, walking in silence for many minutes before coming to a set of double doors. Muller opened them and entered without knocking.

On the other side of the doors was a large room lined with racks of clothing. Uniforms, cassocks and suits. These were the rooms of the official Vatican tailors.

A bent old man approached them. 'Ah, *signori* Muller,' he greeted. 'We are honored to receive a Knight of the Holy See. What can we do for you?'

'We need suits, Giuseppe. Dark, fitted for movement. Expensive enough to blend in with the wealthy but not ostentatious. Room for a shoulder holster and ammunition, the Glock 19. Also two full length overcoats capable of concealing the Heckler & Koch MP7 and two extra 30 round mags. A few silk shirts, white. Dress boots, black leather with a tactical rubber sole and provision for a boot knife. Tie, belt with concealed money pouch and a couple of Tag-Heuer Black Phantom wrist watches. You had better give us two full sets of all of the clothing items and five shirts each. Oh, and also a couple of Ultralight level IIIA bullet proof vests and do not forget the silver spurs on the boots.'

'Silver spurs?' Questioned Otto.

'Later,' answered Muller.

Giuseppe clicked his fingers and four assistants shuffled into the room and started measuring Muller and Otto, writing figures down on notepads and discussing clothes and colors with each other. Four minutes later they were done.

'So, signori,' said Giuseppe. 'A rush order as usual?'

Muller nodded.

'I will have them ready by tomorrow afternoon.'

The sergeant shook his head. 'I am sorry, Giuseppe,' he said. 'I need them faster. Two hours.'

The old man winced. 'You ask too much, signori,' he said. 'This is not Walmart. These are hand crafted Italian suits of the very best quality.'

'I apologize, old friend,' said Muller. 'I wouldn't ask if I didn't need them so soon.'

Giuseppe nodded. 'Fine. I will drop everything. The whole team will work on them. But the shoes…they cannot be done in under three hours.'

Muller smiled. 'Three hours then.'

The two men shook hands and Muller showed Otto out.

This time they followed steps that led down into the bowels of the Holy City, eventually arriving at a steel door. Next to the door was a button, above it a small camera. Muller pressed the button and waited. There was a short buzz and the door clicked open.

The two men entered.

Otto smiled.

The walls were lined with weapons. Hundreds of them.

This was the Vatican armory.

'Wachmeister Muller,' greeted a man who stood behind a large steel desk. He was eating a bowl of steaming pasta, redolent with garlic and melted butter. A large glass of chilled water sweated onto the desk, forming a pool of water. 'What can I do for you?'

Muller handed the quartermaster the Kaplan's note. After a cursory glance the man handed it back.

'I need two Heckler & Koch FABARM FP6 pump shotguns, two hundred rounds of 00 shot,' said Muller. 'Two Heckler & Koch MP7's with the 4.6mm hardened steel penetrator armor piercing rounds and six spare 30 round mags plus a thousand rounds of ammo. A pair of Sig SG 550 Assault rifles, five hundred rounds for same, six extra mags. A couple of Glock 19 semi auto pistols, five hundred rounds, six spare mags.'

The quartermaster nodded. 'Anything else?'

'Two Fox Aviation knives, two Zippo lighters. Four flash-bang grenades. Also a case of UV Bombs and two cold steel, silver plated machetes. Oh, and of course I will need all of the ammunition to be silver jacketed.'

The quartermaster looked uncomfortable.

'What?' Asked Muller.

'I'm sorry, sergeant,' he responded. 'We are no longer at liberty to issue the UV Grenades. Or any silver plated weapons.'

‘Why?’

‘His Holiness has decreed that there is no use for them.’

Otto laughed. ‘Good for him,’ he said. ‘Vampires don’t exist so anti-Vampire ordnance is unnecessary. Brilliant. What a moron.’

‘Please!’ Gasped the quartermaster. ‘You verge on blasphemy and sedition.’

‘I don’t verge upon it, my friend,’ stated Otto.

Muller held up his hand. ‘You read the Kaplan’s letter?’ He asked.

The quartermaster nodded.

‘You saw that it stated that I am to receive, “Anything that I request for a mission that is imperative to the survival of the Church”?’

‘I saw that, but…’

‘No buts, corporal. One case of UV Bombs. Also, I need two army *Vegetato* rucksacks for all the gear. Move it now, the clock is running.’

The quartermaster nodded and started to grab the required weapons and stack them on the steel desk.

‘What the hell is a UV Bomb?’ Asked Otto while they waited.

‘It’s about twice the size of a hand grenade,’ answered Muller. ‘Basically you use it as a flash-bang for Vampires. Pull pin, chuck into room, a millisecond flash of ultra powerful UV light. Disorientates them, burns their skin, blinds them for a few seconds. Gives you a slight edge when you’re going into a room full of them.’

‘And the machetes?’

‘Best way to kill a Vamp is to chop their head off. Also they hate silver. Burns them like acid and slows their healing process down.’

Otto raised an eyebrow. ‘I can see why the Kaplan doesn’t expect to see us coming home.’

Muller smiled. ‘I’m still around and I’ve been doing this for ten years now.’

‘True,’ responded Otto. ‘Still, doesn’t sound like the safest job in the world.’

Muller didn’t answer as he picked up one of the full rucksacks and gestured for Otto to do the same. With a nod the two of them left the armory.

There was still over an hour until they could pick up their suits so Muller led Otto to one of the myriad of small canteens that were dotted about the inner corridors of the main building. A simple hole on the wall, two long tables with benches. There was no menu, you got what was being served. Today it was *Pasta e Fagioli*, thick bean soup with pasta and hunks of bread. The soup was nourishing. The bread was stale. But the two warriors Wolfed the large helpings down, cleared their places and set off to the tailors.

An hour later the two killers emerged from the tailors wearing their new suits and carrying their rucksacks. The suits would have cost

many thousands of Dollars in any high street tailors, perfectly cut and made from the very best cloth.

So now instead of simply looking like two killers, Muller and Otto look like two killers in expensive handmade Italian suits.

Two killers with a mission.

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Chapter 6

Nathan marveled at how easy any task became if you were able to throw almost limitless quantities of cash at it. He had traveled from England to Italy with over fifty Bloodwraiths and two hundred Familiars, unnoticed by any border patrols and under the cover of darkness.

They had purchased an A330-200 Airbus via a shell company based in Egypt and fronting as a test company for Egypt-Air. Usually this would involve a six to eight month delay but a few judicious payments to the correct people in the chain and Nathan's order had been bumped to the front of the queue. Four days later the Airbus landed at Manston Airport, even though it had officially been closed down. Three blacked out tour bus had delivered the passengers and, after taking off and landing at a private airfield some twenty miles outside Rome, a fleet of limousines had transported Nathan and his Bloodwraiths to the Castel Gandolfino, the formal residence of the *Capo di tutti capi*, Janus Augusta, the head of the entire World Vampire Federation. An ancient Vampire who was obsessed with finding the fabled *Corona Potestatem*. An artifact that was said to be a part of the Sword Excalibur. And it was also rumored to be the one thing that could change a Vampire into a Daywalker. Protecting the *Nosferatu* from the devastating effects of the sun as well as allowing them to subsist on normal food as opposed to a diet of human blood.

The Vampire who gained possession of the *Potestatum* would easily become one of the most powerful beings in existence.

Hence the *Capo's* obsession.

Personally, Nathan thought that it was a mere myth. Like the fountain of youth or the ability to turn base metals to gold. He also believed that a true Vampire would have no need of the *Potestatum* to become the most powerful creature in the world. He would merely need strength and dedication.

And Nathan had both of those qualities in spades.

Castel Gandolfino stood on a hill that overlooked the village of Gandolfino, looming over it like a huge, gray stone toad. Ugly and uncompromising. From the outside the building looked abandoned. The crenellations crumbled and the walls covered with creepers, shabby and unkempt. It was only when one got closer that it became obvious that the dilapidated exterior was mere camouflage. Like a

Stone Fish, lurking unseen, waiting to poison an unsuspecting passerby. A predator posing as an old herbivore. The inside, however, was a different story.

Opulence is a mere word until one has truly been exposed to it. Thousands of years of money and power had created a sumptuousness that beggared belief. Art both old and new, hand woven carpets from the east, crystal chandeliers and hand carved mahogany wall panels. Millions upon millions of Dollars worth of luxury gathered by countless people over millennia.

And it transcended mere beauty. To Nathan it was like the eighth wonder of the world, so truly magnificent was it.

The village boasted a population of over two hundred. Every one of the villagers was in thrall to the *Capo* and they all owed him, quite literally, their lives. For with a mere thought he could condemn any one of them to death. And you could not run far or fast enough to escape his wrath. Those born in the village of Gandolfino stayed in Gandolfino. Forever. Or at very least until they died. Or became food.

Nathan and his entourage had been allocated quarters in the north wing of the building. The Bloodwraiths shared two to a room. The Familiars and servants were stacked and racked, triple bunks, nine bodies to a room with shared toilet facilities and a common room to eat in.

The ex-Shadowhunters room was a vast open plan sleeping, sitting, dining area. All windows were covered with rubber-backed drapes to keep out the sun and light was provided by subtle concealed lighting. There was a four poster bed, a massive fireplace. Two Degas', a Bellini, a Picasso and a Klimt vied for attention on the walls, their contrasting styles complimenting each other as opposed to clashing. Nathan took in the whole effect and realized that the room had been put together by someone with a very good eye. Perhaps a professional. He was well pleased. He felt that it was a room befitting his position… even though it may not be fitting to the position that he was aiming to advance to in the very near future.

The Shadowhunter-Vampire hybrid stood in the middle of the room and concentrated. Centering his focus. Envisaging the new path that he had set himself. Becoming his own future.

Then he left, heading for the throne room. Heading for an audience with the *Capo di tutti capi.* A Vampire who had been in existence for over 3000 years. Alive before the Roman Empire had even started. A Vampire that had declared Nathan Tremblay to be a *Caporegime*, a title that donated the holder was so close to the *Capo* as to be almost a member of his own family. An honor that was given to very few. And never before to anyone as young and as new as Nathan.

The Vampire guards standing at the doors to the throne room stood

aside as Nathan approached, opening the double doors, ushering him in and then closing them behind him.

Unusually, the master of masters was seated alone. Apart from the naked corpse of a young boy that lay broken and exsanguinated on the floor next to him. The light in the throne room was provided by smoking torches that burned in steel sconces. A fire blazed high in the vast open fireplace. Carpets and animal skins covered the stone floors and walls and rows of wooden benches filled the front part of the room close to the throne. Much like a church.

Nathan approached the Capo and fell to his knees in front of him. 'Father,' he greeted. 'My pleasure in seeing you is boundless.'

Janus smiled, his overlong, permanent fangs pressing against his bottom lip. 'And I am pleased to see you, child,' he responded. 'As am I both sad and perturbed to hear of your most recent setback.'

'It is nothing, father,' said Nathan. 'War with the Wolves was inevitable. Rather sooner than later. And now we have broken them. Destroyed them utterly.'

'For the loss of fifty of our finest.'

Nathan shrugged. 'We shall replace them. It is of no real concern.'

The *Capo* snarled and Nathan's head snapped up in surprise.

'How dare you deem the true death of so many ancient brethren to be of no real concern? Many of them were over 500 years old. A collective loss of over 20 000 years of existence. Because you did not take adequate care. Because of you and your own private agenda. You let your hatred of a little girl cloud your judgment, your jealousy and your obsession with her, young *Caporegime*. The *Nosferatu* are not yours to use as you will. They are mine and mine alone.'

The *Capo* stood, his ancient and withered body seeming to barely be able to balance on his bent legs, his back a curved reminder of his venerability. 'Everything that you are is because of me. I am everything…you are nothing. Bear that in mind. I am the *Capo di tutti capi.* I am the power.'

Nathan sneered as he stood up. His physical presence was palpable, his eyes glowed red with potency and his steel-cable musculature was visible even beneath his clothing.

'No,' he declaimed. 'You are not the power. You are a fossil. A dinosaur. The *Nosferatu* should be the dominant species on the planet, instead we are forced to skulk in the darkness like rats or cockroaches.'

The *Capo* shook his head. 'You know nothing, child. Look at what your last debacle cost us. Now, this is what is going to happen. You are young. Callow. But you are still undeniably the Scarlet Warrior. But you need to learn. From this moment on you will answer to a group of elders chosen by me. They shall be made up of six members

and shall be referred to as the Forever Council. Perhaps their collective wisdom will teach you something.'

Nathan laughed. 'Or perhaps we could do things my way.'

And the ex-Shadowhunter attacked. He moved so fast that the air imploded into the space that he had just vacated with a miniature thunderclap. He covered the twenty feet in less than one hundredth of a second. Traveling at slightly under the speed of sound.

But the *Capo* was no longer there.

Nathan crashed into the throne and rolled on the floor before the pain hit him like a steam driven hammer-mill. Smashing him to the ground, breaking the bones in his legs and causing blood to jet from his ears and eyes and nose.

Never before had he experienced such agony. It was too intense for him to scream. Or even to move. Again and again he was pummeled and crushed by an unseen force until every bone in his body had been pulverized to mere fragments.

Then as quickly as the attack had started, it stopped.

His Shadowhunter enhanced body started to heal, knitting the fragments of bone together and rebuilding his pulverized internal organs until, after a few minutes, he could move his head. He looked up to see the ancient Capo standing over him, a look of mild amusement on his emaciated face. Peering at him like he was an exhibition in a circus side show. Some minor amusement worth a few seconds of attention before moving on.

Nathan willed his body to heal, using his hatred to recover. As soon as he could he lunged for the decrepit old Vampire, determined to tear his throat out.

And once again he was hammered to the floor in a tsunami of unbearable agony.

The *Capo* laughed. 'Magnificent,' he said. 'Even after all of this torture you still fight back. You truly are the Red Horse. The Scarlet Warrior sent to bring the *Nosferatu* to ascendency.'

Once again the pain stopped and Nathan lay quivering on the stone floor, waiting for his bones to knit.

The *Capo* walked back to his throne, sat down and watched Nathan with interest. After a few minutes the ex-Shadowhunter rose painfully to his feet, staggered over to the throne and knelt in front of his master, his head down. Silent.

Time passed. Ten minutes. Twenty.

Finally. 'Forgive me, Father.'

The *Capo's* laugh sounded like a two rocks being ground together. 'Youthful exuberance,' he said. 'You are ambitious. I expected no less. But I have told you how things will work from now on. You will formulate your plans, you will then report to the Forever Council who

will say yea or nay and you will carry out their instructions. After a while we will revisit your portfolio. Remember, Nathan, you are the Red Horse. You are vitally important to the *Nosferatu*. But it is not your place to lead. Not yet at least. Now we will talk no more of this incident.'

'Thank you,' breathed Nathan, his voice filled with a new found respect.

The *Capo* waved his hand. 'Go. I will call when I need you.'

Nathan left the room.

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Chapter 7

Tag sat under an Oak tree, his back leaning against the trunk. In his left hand a cigarette. In his right a half finished bottle of Jack Daniels. It was perhaps an hour after breakfast. Not yet nine o'clock in the morning. But the big man's eyes had a hunted look that even half a bottle of hard spirits did little to erase.

Troy walked over and sat down beside him, his feet totally silent on the grass and twigs. Almost as though he walked above the ground and not on it. He too lit up a cigarette.

'So, big man,' he greeted. 'Early morning party?'

Tag grunted and took another pull on the bottle.

'Something bothering you?' Asked the young Wolf.

'No,' denied Tag. 'I always drink myself silly every morning.'

Troy didn't push the issue. Instead he simply sat still and waited. If the big man wanted to talk he would do so in his own time.

'Seen Em?' Asked Tag.

Troy nodded. 'Saw her go to her room just as the sun came up. She'll be out for most of the day. She's proper nocturnal now.'

A brief look of relief flashed across Tag's face. 'So she won't want feeding then. Not until tonight.'

Troy nodded in agreement. 'Not for a few hours.' He looked closely at the big man before he continued to speak. Choosing his words carefully so as not to inadvertently insult the Jamaican. 'So this feeding business,' he said. 'Takes a bit out of you?'

Tag nodded. 'But it's the least that I can do. Can't have the girly eating innocents and turning them. So we got no choice. Anyhow, I should have saved her. It's my fault that she is what she is.'

'No,' denied Troy. 'It's all of our faults. And it's none of our faults. We couldn't have foreseen the events that unfolded.'

Tag shrugged. 'I should never have let her leave my side. Whatever the circumstances.'

'Does it hurt?' Asked Troy.

Tag didn't answer for a while. Instead he drank some more and then lit another cigarette. Finally he reacted. 'Sylvian told me that when a Vamp feeds on someone it's a real pleasurable feeling for that person. That's why so many Familiars allow it. It's almost like sex or something.' He took a long pull of Jack. 'I haven't found that to be the case. In fact I would say that it would be the direct opposite. Not only

is it the most physically painful thing that I have ever experienced, it also hurts on a different level.'

'What do you mean?'

Tag shook his head. 'Man, I don't know how to explain it.' He thought for a while. 'It's sorta like…I don't know. Like having your soul ripped out. Like all of the life is torn from your body, leaving a black hole. An abyss that you have to refill on a daily basis. I mean, it's like being dead and alive at the same time. It's dark, man. Really dark.'

'That's heavy,' commented Troy. 'I wonder why Emily's different.'

'I spoke to the Prof,' said Tag. 'He reckons it might be because Em is so powerful. You see, the whole thing with Vamps is that they feed for two reasons. One is the blood, the other is the hunt. In short, the Prof says that they need to kill as much as they need to eat. Problem is that I can't be killed. But that doesn't stop the girly Vampire from trying. And because she be so powerful, the Prof reckons that she is literally trying to rip the life outta me.' Tag shuddered. 'It can't be done but she gives it a good go.' He took another slug of whisky, closed his eyes and lay back against the Oak again. 'Tonight,' he said. His voice little more than a whisper. 'She'll feed again tonight.'

Troy sat with the big man for a while longer. After ten minutes Tag fell asleep, his head lolling to one side, the almost empty bottle beside him.

The young Wolf left, heading inside. He needed to talk to William. Or maybe Merlin. He needed to see if there was something that they could do to ease Tag's suffering.

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Chapter 8

Over the years the Knights of the Holy See had built up a literal army of informers. With over fifty thousand priests and almost sixty million Catholics in Italy it was difficult for anyone to get away with any form of major sin let alone Vampirism.

In fact the Knights' biggest problem had always been an overload of information. However, over the years, they had built a system wherein all info was carefully sifted through by the local priest who would then pass the facts on to the diocesan priest in charge of one of the two hundred and twenty five dioceses. These senior priests would then relay what they perceived to be the real cases on to the Kaplan at the Vatican and he would make a final decision on whether or not the Knights would get involved.

Nine times out of ten the Kaplan decided that the Knights involvement was unnecessary. And even when they did get involved perhaps only one in fifty incidents actually involved supernatural forces. Vampires, WereWolves, demonic possession or other various creatures of the night.

Out of all of those the Knights considered the Vampires to be their worst and most feared enemy.

The undead. The *Nosferatu*. For not only were they the most dangerous, they also had the ability to turn their victims. And for one of the members of the *Sedes Sacrorum* to be turned into one of their own most dreaded enemies held for them the ultimate horror.

But now His Holiness had decreed that the *Nosferatu* no longer existed and, as such, the network of priests could no longer provide information. Muller and Otto were on their own.

Muller pulled the Fiat Abarth over to the side of the road, parking in the typical Italian fashion by simply stopping in a vague proximity to the sidewalk, the car sticking out into the road at a wild angle. The small Fiat wasn't Muller's first choice of car, he had wanted something larger. Preferably armored. Instead the only thing left that had any appreciable power was the tiny Abarth. Capable of doing over doing over 140MPH and getting from 0-60 in under six seconds, the car was a real pocket rocket. But after they had loaded their equipment and then wedged themselves in it was more cramped than an iron maiden.

They were in the village of Boruta at the foothills of the mountains outside of Rome. An isolated enclave of less than two hundred people.

Before their info had dried up, Muller had received a report of a young man being found in the vineyards, his neck had been savagely torn open and he had been totally drained of blood.

Most locals put the death down to an attack by a brown bear. Unusual but not unheard of. The local priest, however, knew better. Muller had come to the village for two reasons, firstly to exact vengeance and, secondly, to question the fiend in an attempt to track down more of the undead.

Muller pointed out a large three story house. 'Apparently that's where the demon lives. It's day time so it's most likely that he'll be asleep. However, he will have servants. Also, we cannot simply go in with guns blazing. First we need to verify the story. Come on, let's tool up.'

The two men donned their weapons, sidearms, HK7 submachine guns, a UV bomb each and their machetes. Then they shrugged their overcoats on to conceal them.

They walked casually up to the residence, knocked on the front door and waited.

'I notice that we don't carry crucifixes or holy water,' said Otto. 'Don't they work?'

'They work for me,' answered Muller. 'Sort of. More of a deterrent than an offensive weapon. But then they rely on iron-clad faith. Would they work for a man guilty of blasphemy and sedition?' He shrugged. 'Probably not. Anyway, I find that a silver bladed machete does the job better.'

The doorknob started to move and the two men readied themselves, their tension a palpable thing. Slowly the door opened to reveal a bent old lady, her hair white but her eyes still bright and clear. She peered around the door suspiciously.

'Good morning, *nonna*,' greeted Muller. 'We are representatives of the Holy Church. I wonder if we could come inside for a chat?'

Before he even finished the old lady was shutting the door. '*No. Vaffancullo!*'

Otto stuck his foot in the doorway, jamming it open. 'I'm afraid that we are going to have to insist,' he said. 'The church is concerned for your immortal soul, grandmother.'

'I'm not your grandmother, you oaf. Now take your foot out of the door before I hurt you.'

Otto laughed.

The door exploded outwards as nine balls of double-aught shotgun lead ripped through it, hitting Otto in the middle of his chest and throwing him back into the street.

Muller moved instantly, kicking the remains of the door aside, punching the old woman in the nose and tearing the still smoking

shotgun from her hands. She fell backwards and sprawled on the floor. Muller dropped the empty shotgun, drew his pistol and covered the old lady.

Behind him Otto clambered slowly to his feet, shaking his head.

'So the vest held up?' Asked Muller.

'Yep,' confirmed Otto. 'But I feel like I've been kicked in the chest by a horse.'

'Serve you right for being so slow.'

'Yeah,' agreed Otto. 'Not used to being shot at point blank range by insane old ladies.'

'I'm not insane,' screeched the old lady. 'How dare you?'

Muller put his foot on her chest. 'Quite, *nonna*,' he commanded. 'Now tell me, why the armed reception?'

'You've come for the Master,' she answered. 'Damn religious fanatics. Why can't you just leave us alone?'

'And simply let the…master…kill innocents and feed on them?'

'There are no true innocents,' shouted the old lady. 'We have all sinned.'

'Amen to that,' agreed Muller. 'Now where is the Vampire?'

'Go to hell.'

'Last chance, lady,' warned Muller.

The old lady spat at the Knight. Muller's pistol boomed twice as he shot the old retainer in the chest.

Otto did a double take. 'Hey, you just shot an old lady.'

Muller raised an eyebrow. 'Yes,' he agreed. 'I am aware of that.'

'But…' the big man hesitated. 'She's an old lady.'

'And she is in league with the devil,' said Muller. 'The penalty for that is death. Now let's find this Vampire and end him.'

The Knight holstered his pistol and took out his MP7, gesturing for Otto to do the same. Then he led the way through the house, kicking open doors and clearing rooms as they went. After they had cleared the ground floor they proceeded up the stairs. The moment they got to the top of the staircase a door in the corridor flew open and a man ran at them, moving at a blistering speed, so fast as to be little more than a blur.

But Muller was already firing. The MP7 fires at a rate exceeding fifteen rounds per second so he expended his entire thirty round magazine in the blink of an eye. Every silver plated slug struck the Vampire in the chest, halting its attack and throwing it back down the corridor like a rag doll.

Muller reloaded and ran forward. As he did so the Vampire was already healing. Starting to stand. But Muller aimed at its knees and again ripped off an entire clip, shredding the blood suckers lower limbs and driving it once more to the floor. Then he holstered his

submachine gun, drew his pistol and shot the creature twice in the center of his forehead.

'Hey,' exclaimed Otto. 'I thought that you wanted to question him.'

'I do,' said Muller. 'That's why I only shot him twice in the face.'

As they spoke the Vamp shook his head and started to sit up. Muller casually shot him again, took out his machete and planted his booted foot on the Vampire's chest. Then he ran one of the silver spurs that were attached to his heels down the Vamps chest. The razor sharp spurs left a smoking trail. The Vamp screamed aloud and tried vainly to escape.

'Oh,' said Otto. 'Now I know what the spurs are for.'

'Stop screaming,' commanded Muller. 'Now, let's talk. It is going to be a simple conversation, you tell me where I can find another Vampire and then I kill you. Quick and clean. If not, then I douse you in holy water, keep you alive for hours, maybe days. And then kill you. It's your choice.'

'Holy water doesn't affect us,' yelled the Vampire. 'You moron.'

'It does if it's wielded by an ordained minister who is strong in his faith,' countered Muller.

'Rubbish. It's a myth,' insisted the Vampire. 'Do your worst warrior-priest.'

With his boot still on the Vampire's chest, Muller reached into his jacket and pulled out a crystal flask. He unstopped the lid and then intoned a quick prayer in Latin.

'Libera nos, quæsumus, Domine, ab omnibus malis, da propitius pacem in diebus nostris, ut, ope misericordiæ tuæ adiuti, et a peccato simus semper liberi, et ab omni perturbatione securi: expectantes beatam spem et adventum Salvatoris nostri Iesu Christi.'

'Mumbo-Jumbo,' laughed the Vampire.

Muller poured a quantity of the Holy Water out onto the recumbent Vampires face.

Instantly his flesh started to blister and melt and the smell of burning meat filled the air.

The Vampire went mad with pain and Muller gestured to Otto to help hold him down. The big man slammed his boot onto the Vamps chest and leaned his full weight onto him, pinning him to the floor.

'The Power of Christ compels me,' shouted Muller as he poured out more of the Holy Water.

The Vamp screamed for mercy but Muller didn't stop until the monsters facial bones started to show through his ravaged flesh.

'Mercy, priest. I'll talk. Please, no more Holy Water.'

'Tell me.'

'There is another, in the village of San Tobias. He lives in the mansion on the hill overlooking the village. He has a mate.'

Muller tipped a dash more Holy Water out. ‘I need more. My reports show that there is a new movement of Vampires. More turnings, more hunting than in living memory.’

The Vampire clawed at his own face, ripping at the ragged strips of flesh as he tried desperately to rid himself of the effects of the Blessed Water. ‘Please, priest. I know nothing.’

Another drop of Holy Water etched into his face.

‘They come from England,’ screamed the blood sucker. ‘There is a new war-leader. He is powerful. Some say as powerful as the *Capo*. It is said that he has come to lead us to supremacy over the humans.’

‘Where?’

‘I swear I do not know,’ blubbered the Vampire. ‘Maybe up towards France. Turin, Milan. I’m guessing. I have heard rumors, that is all. Please, I live alone and have done so for over seventy years, I have little knowledge of the council and their doings. Have mercy. I can tell you nothing else.’

Muller stared for a few seconds then nodded. ‘I believe you.’ He pocketed his crystal flask, drew his machete and clove the Vampires head in twain. Then he looked up to see a look of utter respect on Otto’s face.

‘I had no idea that Holy Water could do that,’ he said. ‘You said that you had faith but I didn’t appreciate how deep that faith ran inside you.’

Muller raised an eyebrow, took out the bottle, opened the top and poured some of the liquid onto the stone floor. As it struck it immediately started to smoke and sizzle, eating into the bare stone.

‘It’s not Holy Water,’ admitted Muller. ‘It’s a suspension of colloidal silver in sulfuric acid. The acid burns them and the silver stops them healing. Once they are convinced that they are being smote down by the power of our Lord it literally scares the crap out of them.’

Otto shook his head. ‘So,’ he said. ‘No faith. It’s just a trick.’

‘No,’ disagreed Muller. ‘I have great faith. It’s yet another weapon of the Lord. Just because it wasn’t actually Holy Water doesn’t mean that it’s not a legitimate part of our blessed armory. Now, let’s go. We head for the village of San Tobias. Maybe those bloodsuckers will know a little more.’

The two soldiers of the Lord left without closing the door, got into their too-small car and drove out of the village, heading north.

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Chapter 9

William shook his head. ‘Absolutely out of the question. In fact, young Wolf, to even bring up the subject could be subject to punishment.’

There was a growl of agreement amongst the other Wolves as they sat around the large trestle table in their general quarters.

‘But Emily is in great mental pain,’ said Troy. ‘We failed to protect her and now we fail to help her.’

Jack Wishbone, the Alpha of Bad Moon MC stood up and faced Troy. ‘Sit down, puppy,’ he shouted. ‘How dare you question the Omega? How dare you question anyone? You live at the bottom of the totem pole. The most junior member of the Pack. If I were you I would say no more. Now sit.’

‘I am not you,’ stated Troy.

A frisson of excitement rippled through the two packs as the Wolves anticipated a physical disagreement.

Jack Wishbone looked to William for support but the Omega simply shook his head. ‘Pack rules say that anyone who wishes to challenge the Alpha for leadership is entitled to do so.’ He turned to Troy. ‘Do you wish to challenge, young Wolf?’

Troy nodded. ‘But I am not challenging for leadership,’ he said. ‘Instead I merely challenge for the right to speak.’

‘Unusual,’ said William. ‘But I shall allow it.’

The Wolves stood and filed out of the building, forming a circle in the open area next to it.

Both Jack and Troy stripped their clothes off and stood in the middle.

William stood with the rest of the pack. ‘You all know the rules. This is a fight for ascendency. It is up to the participants to decide whether it be to first blood or to the death.’

‘To the death,’ growled Jack.

Troy said nothing.

‘Commence,’ shouted William.

Jack changed instantly, morphing into Wolf mode and attacking in one fluid movement built from many years of practice. His jaws opened wide, exposing his massive razor sharp teeth and his claws flashed in the setting sun as he extended himself forward.

And at the last microsecond Troy leapt to one side, changing as he

did so. But not for him was the full Wolf. Instead the young Werewolf morphed into his man-Wolf mode. An eight foot tall hybrid of man and Wolf.

The Pack gasped, for, although Troy had used his man-Wolf mode when the Pack attacked the Bloodwraiths many had not seen him and most of those who had simply assumed that they had seen the Omega. For it was accepted knowledge that only the Omega could assume the hybrid shape.

They were incorrect.

Troy lashed out at Jack, smashing him to the ground with one immense fist. The sound of the Alpha's ribs breaking was clearly audible. Troy didn't push his advantage, instead he waited, head cocked to one side, eyes alert.

Jack attacked again. This time Troy stood fast, grabbed the attacking Wolf with both hands, lifted him above his head and slammed him to the ground. Jack's front leg shattered, as did his shoulder. He recovered and limped away, waiting for Troy to push his advantage. Waiting for the young Wolfman to finish him. But again, Troy simply stood and waited.

The Alpha of Bad Moon limped in a full circle, looking for an avenue of attack. Finally he sunk low and charged, going for Troy's legs.

The Wolfman moved so fast that the rest of the pack could barely see him. He jumped over the charging Alpha, grabbed his back legs, picked him up with ease and hammered him to the ground once more.

The Alpha lay panting in pain, his tongue lolling out, eyes glazed.

The pack stood silent as they waited for Troy Wolfman to exact the ultimate price. Jack had chosen a fight to the death and now he would reap the rewards of his arrogance.

Troy threw back his head and howled. The sound cut through the forest, driving birds into the air and sending foxes and badgers scurrying to their dens in fear.

But he did not perform the *coup de gras*. Instead he morphed back to human shape, walked over to Jack and knelt beside him.

'You are still my Alpha,' he declared. 'I did not want to fight for ascendency. Nor did I want to fight to the death. I simply wanted to be able to voice my opinion. This is too important to not look at all and any aspects. Emily is too important. The war is too important. The pack is too important. Personal animosities must be put aside.'

Jack morphed back into his human form. His broken bones were already healing as his Werewolf physiology accelerated his healing abilities to something like one thousand times the speed of a normal human. Internal organs re-grew, bones knitted and torn muscles reattached.

He stood up and bowed to the young Wolf. 'With the Omega's

permission I say that the youngster can speak.' Then he held out his hand.

Troy grasped it firmly, shook. Neither of them smiled.

'The young one may speak,' agreed William.

'As I said before,' started Troy. 'We failed to protect Emily Shadowhunter, we allowed the Vampires to curse her with their disease, and now we fail to help her. There is also Tag's predicament to consider. Every day he is savaged by the Vampire that we allowed Emily to become. However, if we could give her the *Corona Potestatum* then she could become a Daywalker. She would be freed from the tyranny of the undead and, most importantly, she would be on our side. Arguably the most powerful creature in the world helping us to hunt down the *Nosferatu*.'

As the young Wolf looked at the pack he saw respect. But not agreement.

'She helped us,' he continued. 'She fought beside us. She even traveled to the banks of the river Styx beside one of our Alphas. We owe it to her.'

William shook his head. 'Life is suffering,' he said. 'Her suffering does not make us beholden to her. That is not the Pack way.'

'But it is the human way,' argued Troy. 'And are we not human as well?'

Again the Omega shook his head. 'No, young Wolf. We are Pack. Before anything, above anything. Pack.'

The rest of the seated Wolves growled together. 'Pack!'

'So we will not help Emily.' Said Troy.

'We will stand by her,' answered William. 'We shall, fight beside her. But the Pack cannot allow her to control the *Potestatum*. It is too much power to be held in one set of hands.'

'Even if the hands are those of a Shadowhunter?' Asked Troy.

The Omega nodded.

'Then what is the *Potestatum* for?' Asked Troy. 'Is it merely something to be hidden forever? To be guarded at all costs but for no apparent reason? Why not simply destroy it?'

'Not sure that it can be destroyed,' answered William. 'And as to the whys and wherefores, because I, the Omega, said so. Now, you have had your chance to speak, young Wolf. The discussion is over. Instead of this nonsense use your time thinking on our next move against the Vampires.' William stood up. 'And I bid you all to do the same. It is almost night, we will meet again tomorrow morning and I want all and any ideas. All will be equal in the discussion. Pack!'

'Pack!' Repeated the Wolves as their Omega left the room.

Troy followed the pack leader, planning on speaking more to him. But before he could, the Omega stripped down, changed into full Wolf

and loped off into the forest at speed. So instead he simply went back into the main house and sat down in the kitchen. He sat for over half an hour, alone with his thoughts. His contemplations. His plans.

Tag broke his reverie as he banged open the door and set to preparing a pot of tea. He poured two mugs full, handed one to Troy and sat down opposite him.

'Wassup?' He asked. 'You look like your dog ate your canary.'

Troy decided to tell Tag his plan, starting with what had just transpired with the pack and the Omega. When he had finished the big man sat silent for a few minutes. Then he spoke.

'You got big balls, Wolfman,.' He said. 'So if I get you right, you want to disobey your Omega, split from the Pack, take a Vampire with you while you steal what is probably the most guarded relic in the world so that you can make said Vampire a Daywalker and at the same time save me from been eaten every night. That about right?'

Troy shrugged. 'About right, I suppose. Except there is one thing I didn't tell you.'

'Pray tell then, Wolfman,' urged Tag. 'It really doesn't matter what you may or may not have omitted, because I don't see how it could make things any more difficult.'

'Well, I'm not one hundred percent sure where the actual *Corona Potestatum* is. I mean, I know it's in Europe, hidden in the Fey communities under the major cities, but not sure exactly where. Could be a variety of places. You see, none of us know. It's moved around all the time to prevent it being found.'

Tag laughed. 'I doubt that will be a huge problem,' he said. 'I reckon that the Pack will hunt us down and kill us before we even get out of the country. Whatever, I'm in. If there's a chance of helping the girly then we gotta take it, whatever the risk.'

'As am I,' said Sylvian. Both Tag and Troy did a double take. The Bloodborn had entered the room so silently that even the heightened senses of the Werewolf had not noticed him. 'You won't get anywhere without me,' continued the Frenchman. 'I know Europe; I know the Fay underworld that you will be entering. And I know how to travel at night, how to keep out of the sun. How to survive traveling as a Vampire.'

'Why would you help us?' Asked Troy.

'Because I believe that you are correct, young Wolf. I believe that Emily Shadowhunter could well be something special.'

Tag raised an eyebrow. 'Could it also be that you would love to have some compatriots help you search for the *Potestatum* so that you, yourself could claim it. Then you would be the Daywalker.'

Sylvian nodded. 'That did cross my mind. How could it not? But, no, I think that it is not my destiny. It is Emily's.'

‘I want to leave tonight,’ said Troy. ‘In fact as soon as possible. It should give us a full night’s lead. Enough time to get out of the country if we are lucky.’

Tag nodded. I agree. Let me fetch Emily.’ He stood up. Both Troy and Sylvian could see the tension on the big man’s shoulders as he started to walk from the room. ‘Give me ten minutes or so,’ he said. ‘She will have woken with the hunger and will need to feed.’

Troy nodded. ‘I’ll pack what we need. Meet us around the back where all of the cars are parked.’

Tag left the room without looking back and Troy and Sylvian went to collect bags and rucksacks to pack.

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Chapter 10

Troy crept around the side of the house and across to the area where all of the transport was situated. It was dark but he had no need of a flashlight as his Werewolf eyes saw just as well in the moonlight as the sun.

Sylvian was already there, standing next to one of the Range Rovers. He was smiling, his lips pulled up in his typical sardonic expression of amusement.

'What's so funny,' asked Troy.

'If you had to choose any of the SUV's which one would it be?'

Troy cast a quick glance around the lot. 'The one that we're standing next to,' he answered. 'It's newer, good condition, and it's the only one with tinted windows so even if the sun came up it would help protect you and Em.'

Sylvian nodded. 'I concur,' he said. Then he opened the front passenger door. On the seat was a large briefcase. He opened it. 'Here, take a look.'

Troy leaned over. The case was full of high denomination Euros, Pound Sterling notes and Dollars, at least fifty thousand Dollars worth of currency. Lying on top of the money was a sheaf of passports, both European and Russian. The young Wolfman picked up a couple and flicked through them. They had various different names, some female, most male. There were no photos. There were also ten cell phones.

'All you need to do is affix a photo ID and you have a genuine passport,' explained the Bloodborn. 'Also, all of the sim cards on the phones are for international roaming. I checked. Prepaid burner phones.'

'That's fantastic,' said Troy. 'Where did you get all of this?'

Sylvian laughed softly. 'Didn't. It was here already.'

'But…how?'

'William,' answered the Frenchman. 'He knew what we would do. Obviously, as Omega and protector of the *Potestatum*, he cannot give us permission. However, he has given us his blessing. There is more.' Sylvian reached into his pocket and took out a ring. Gold, the Wolf's crest on it, picked out in silver with a small ruby eye. He gave it to Troy. 'This was also in the case. I assume it is for you, Wolfman. The ring is Sir William's seal. You will find that it commands great respect

where we are all going.'

'Well then it's probably for you,' argued Troy. 'Why would he give me his seal?'

'Because you are Wolfman,' said Sylvian. 'You are Pack. He would never give me this ring. Trust me.'

Troy accepted the gold ring and slipped it onto his finger. It fitted perfectly. As he did so both Emily and Tag arrived. The big man looked unsteady on his feet and Troy noticed that, although he had obviously changed his shirt, there were still traces of blood on his collar.

Emily looked strong and healthy but her eyes belied her outward appearance as they flicked from side to side, never resting. Haunted. Full of despair and self-loathing.

'Hey,' exclaimed Tag as he threw two haversacks into the SUV. 'That be a lavatory full of cash. Where you get it?'

'William,' answered Troy. 'He also left me this ring. It's his seal.'

Tag shook his head. 'Man, these Wolves can't make up their minds. So, they for us or against us?'

'Yes,' said Sylvian with a smile.

'Thought so,' quipped Tag. 'Well that helps to clear up nothing. Troy, can you drive? I think that I'll be taking a short nap. Where we going first anyway?'

The Wolfman shrugged.

'We head East,' said Sylvian as he climbed into the passenger seat. 'I can't remember the exact route but let me make a call and get directions. A friend of mine owns a private airfield and a few passenger planes. He can get us to Europe by sun up.'

They all got in; Troy started the Range Rover and pulled out, driving slowly to keep the noise down. Once they were out of the immediate surrounds he put his foot down and picked up speed.

From the depth of the forest a pair of shining eyes watched them leave. And then the huge Wolf threw his head back and howled mournfully, the sound an aching salute to his own loneliness. Acknowledgement of his solitude.

The call of the Omega Wolf.

Leader.

Alone.

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Chapter 11

They had flown from a small airstrip situated in Surrey, a few hours' drive from William's forest hideout. Sylvian's friend had turned out to be a small, dark taciturn man who communicated in grunts, nods and short monosyllabic sentences. Sylvian called him Latobias but the dark man informed the rest of them that his name was Doug. For some reason this had greatly amused the Bloodborn Frenchman.

He had piloted the six seater Beech Baron with a deft hand, taking off in the dark and then landing less than half an hour later, without the use of landing lights, at another private airfield somewhere outside Paris.

During the short flight, Troy had explained that the *Corona Potestatum* had been protected by the wereWolves for many hundreds of years. There were always at least two Wolves personally protecting the item itself but its safety was doubly ensured as Wolves always stayed in one of the hidden cities that were situated under some of the major cities in Europe. As well as this, the *Potestatum* was constantly moved on a random basis to prevent anyone tracking it down. However, the three most likely places were Paris, Rome or Cluj Napoca, the capital city of Transylvania.

With Paris being the closest they had decided to start there.

After they had landed, Sylvian opened the briefcase and took out a thick wad of money. He offered it to Latobias but the dark man refused, shaking his head and then ignoring the offering. Sylvian did not argue and simply returned the cash to the case.

As soon as the four friends had alighted, the plane took off and climbed rapidly away.

'Where are we?' Asked Troy.

'Near the Maison Forestière,' answered Sylvian. 'A short drive from Paris.'

The Wolfman glanced at his watch. 'Impossible,' he said. 'We flew for around twenty minutes. It would take us over an hour to get here.'

Sylvian shrugged. 'And yet here we are.'

'How?' Insisted Troy.

'When he is in the air, Latobias is not subject to the normal constraints that we are.'

'That means nothing,' argued Troy. 'Explain.'

'Latobias is the Celtic god of wind and air,' explained Sylvian. 'Great

friend to have when you need to travel and get there quickly.'

Troy looked impressed. 'Wow,' he exclaimed. 'That's the first god that I've ever met.'

'Get used to it,' returned Sylvian. 'Where we're heading you're going to meet a lot more. And most of them are decidedly unimpressive.'

As they were talking, a long wheel based Mercedes arrived. Dark blue with heavily tinted windows. It pulled up beside them and a driver stepped out, threw them a salute and opened the back door.

'And who would this be?' Asked Tag. 'The god of luxury transport.'

Em and Tag smiled but Sylvian merely raised an eyebrow. Em got into the back first, followed by the rest of the men. The car had been stretched slightly, just enough to fit four large seats on the back, a couple of sets facing one another. But it had not been stretched so far as to make it conspicuous. In between the driver and the passengers was a tinted sheet of privacy glass. All of the windows were tinted dark enough so that even the sunniest of days would allow both Em and Sylvian full protection from the UV light.

'This is a company that I often use for transport in Europe. They are geared to chauffeur celebrities around, hence the tinted windows and the luxury.' He gestured around the cabin. 'Here, a full bar with snacks. Bullet proof glass and doors. The drivers are all ex-special forces and the company itself is the picture of discretion.'

Tag nodded in approval. 'Nice,' he admitted. 'Where to from here?'

'I have a place in Paris,' answered Sylvian. 'In the Saint Germain-des-Prés, 6th Arrondissement next to the River Seine. It is uniquely suited to our quest.'

'In what way?' Asked Troy.

'You'll see,' answered the Frenchman.

The trip took longer than they all expected. Even though it was late at night the traffic in the city was bumper to bumper and the drivers drove with Gallic fervor, shouting, hooting and gesticulating at each other. But before the sun came up the driver steered the limousine through a set of private electric gates and into an underground parking. Once again he alighted, opened the door, saluted and left without comment.

Sylvian led the party to a non-descript doorway. Next to the door was a discrete glass panel. The Bloodborn held his hand against it and a light flickered across his palm.

'Digital palm print access,' he explained. 'Top of the line security.'

The door swung open and they followed Sylvian up a short flight of stairs and into a large entrance hall. The décor was beyond magnificent. Genuine Louis XV furniture, hand woven carpets on marble flooring, crystal chandeliers glittered in the high ceilings and an eclectic mix of Monet, Degas and Duchamp paintings lined the

walls.

And this was just the entrance hall.

They continued to follow the Bloodborn through a set of double doors and up a flight of steps into a large drawing room. The opposite wall to the entrance was one vast glass window. Troy noticed the slight distortion as he looked through it and, after checking the sides of the installation, deduced that the glass must be at least four inches thick. Obviously bullet proof. The view of the Seine was spectacular.

'It is close to sunrise,' said Sylvian. 'But do not worry. I have installed a few technological safety devices.' He flicked a switch on the wall and the huge sheet of glass went instantly dark. One could still see through it but it was almost opaque. 'I have activated the solar screen manually,' said the Bloodborn. 'But the moment the sun rises it will also activate automatically.'

'Got any food,' asked Troy.

'Sure,' answered Sylvian. 'Follow me.'

They trooped through to a large eat-in kitchen and the Frenchman started loading foodstuffs onto the central table. Loaves of bread, a vast array of charcuterie, cheeses, pates, pickles and patisseries. There was also wine, beer and sodas.

'The place is always stocked,' explained the Frenchman. 'Even if I am not here.'

Both Troy and Tag attacked the food with gusto. Emily looked away, slightly nauseated by anything that wasn't human blood.

'Right,' said Sylvian. 'Troy, you say that the *Potestatum* is secreted in one of the major Unseen Cities.'

Troy nodded and then swallowed quickly so that he could answerer. 'Yep, Paris, Rome or Cluj in Transylvania.'

'I wouldn't consider Cluj to be a major city,' interrupted Tag.

'It is to the Faye Folk,' said Sylvian.

'And what about London?' Continued Tag. 'Surely that is one of the major European cities.'

The Frenchman shook his head. 'Unseen London was destroyed in the Second World War. It was decided by the Unseen Council that it would remain as a memorial. Apparently some folk still live there but it is frowned upon. Anyway, have any of you been to one of the Unseen Cities?'

All three shook their heads.

'Right then,' continued Sylvian. 'They are basically cities situated underground. They have been there pretty much since there above ground counterparts and sometimes even before. As mankind grew more powerful and the Christian God started to hold more sway, the minor gods of earth and field and elements started to lose much of their power, as did their minions and children. Trolls, goblins, Orcs,

pixies, elves and the rest. They became more mortal. Similar to powerful versions of ourselves. I say similar…but not the same. Even in modern society a seven foot elf with their pointed ears and huge slanted eyes will stand out like a porcupine at a nudist colony. Although most of the Faye people can project a disguise of sorts when they are in above ground society, it is very stressful to do so. As a result, they would rather simply stay apart. Hence, the Unseen Cities.'

'So the Unseen Cities are like reservations for Faye Folk,' said Tag.

'I wouldn't quite put it that way,' answered Sylvian. 'But, essentially, yes.'

'Cool,' said Tag. 'So then, let's go to this Unseen Paris, find the wereWolves that are holding the *Potestatum* and job done.'

'It's called Pareen,' said the Frenchman. 'Unseen Paris is Pareen. Unseen Rome, Romeen. Cluj is Cluj, no change. Look, it's not that simple. Firstly, Pareen is huge. It's a major city. Secondly, and this is where things start to get seriously complicated, it's full of cats.'

'Cats?' Asked Troy and Emily at the same time.

Sylvian laughed. 'Many thousands of cats. More cats than people. All of the Unseen Cities are.'

'Why?' Asked Emily.

'Because cats, most animals actually, are terrified of Vampires and WereWolves. They go mental in the presence of either.'

'I don't get it,' said Troy. 'So what?'

'So they don't allow WereWolves or Vampires into the Unseen Cities,' explained Sylvian. 'And to ensure that they can't simply sneak in, the council makes sure that there are cats everywhere. A Werewolf or Vamp tries to walk around and the cats go berserk. Nowhere to hide.'

'Why no Vamps or Wolves?' Asked Troy.

'The Unseen Council look on the Unseen Cities as places of refuge. As such they want no part of the war between Vamp and Wolf. And, although the cities are large, they aren't big enough for two such mortal enemies. Back in the day, some five hundred years ago, they were both allowed in. The resulting wars almost destroyed the cities. So now, no Vamps. No Wolves. End of problems.'

'Well that means Em, Troy and you can't go in,' said Tag.

'I'm not a Vampire,' snapped Sylvian. 'I'm Bloodborn. So technically I am allowed in.'

'But what about the cats?' Continued Tag.

'Cats love me,' answered Sylvian. 'They're only terrified of WereWolves and Vampires because a Werewolf is an apex predator and a Vampire simply wants to kill everything. I don't need blood to survive so I don't give off that killing vibe.'

'So it just be Tag and you,' said the big man. 'Not sure about that,

Troy got the seal and I don't like to leave Em alone. How we gonna do this? And anyway, if there be no WereWolves then how come Troy's brothers are down there with the *Potestatum*.'

Sylvian shrugged. 'Good question. I can only assume that they have found some manner of loophole, after all, the Omega says that they are there so they must be there. Secondly, it's theoretically possible to get Troy and Em in,' observed Sylvian. 'But it's all going to rely on Emily. I'm sure that she can do it.'

'Do what?' Asked Em.

'You know about Glamoring?' He asked.

'I assume that you mean the Vampire power to mentally coerce someone to do what they want, eradicate memory, control. That sort of thing?'

Sylvian nodded. 'Exactly that sort of thing.'

'I can't do it,' said Em.

'Why so sure?' Asked Sylvian. 'Have you tried?'

Emily shook her head. 'No, but what I mean is, I cannot do it. I won't do it. It's like mental rape. Grabbing someone's brain and forcing to do what you want. No way, I'm disgusted enough with myself, please don't ask me to go there.'

'It's not like that,' insisted the Frenchman. 'I'm not going to ask you to force anyone to do anything. I'm simply going to show you how to make a harmless suggestion. A feeling of belonging. It might slightly affect the Faye Folk or some humans but I need you to do it to allay the fear that the cats feel.'

'What? Sort of like a cat-whisperer?' Asked Tag.

Sylvian smiled. 'Big Man, you got it. Just like a cat-whisperer.'

'So it won't hurt them?' Asked Em.

'Not even a little.'

'Okay,' she conceded. 'I'm in. Show me.'

'Have you ever meditated?' Asked Sylvian.

'I'm a fifth dan black belt, of course I have.'

'Good, let us start, it doesn't take long. Now relax, breath. Find your center. Empty your mind. See only white. A mist. A fog. Impenetrable. All around you. You are free. Floating. Now, see yourself as a single dot floating freely in the mist. Concentrate on the dot. Are you there?'

'I am,' whispered Em.

'What color is the dot?'

'Red.'

'I want you to change the color of the dot. The dot that represents you. Make it blue. But not dark blue. Light, pastel blue. Like a baby boy's blanket. A soft, sky blue.'

Emily struggled for a while and then started to shake. 'I can't,' she said. 'It keeps going back to red.'

‘Do not panic,’ urged Sylvian. ‘The red is the Vampire you. It is how your inner self views what it has become. Red. Blood. Death. You must purge that from your mind. Only blue must remain. The beauty of a summer sky. The pale blue of the eyes of a newborn baby. Blue.’

The two sat still for at least ten minutes and then Emily seemed to visibly relax.

‘I can feel it,’ said Troy in a whisper.

‘Me too,’ concurred Tag.

Emily smiled.

‘You are there,’ said Sylvian. ‘Now you must maintain it. Allow the color to wash over you, to seep through you. Imagine your very blood turning light blue. Hold it. Nurture it.’ The Bloodborn stood up. ‘Well done, Emily. You are ready.’ He turned to Troy. ‘You must stay close to her. No more than six feet away. Her aura will cover you as well. The cats will no longer perceive a predator. They will see only harmony.’

‘Will she be able to keep it up?’ Asked Tag.

Sylvian shrugged in his typically Gallic way. ‘I hope so. Now all come with me, we need to tool up. I would like us to leave as soon as possible.’

‘Any chance of a short nap before we set off? ‘ Asked Tag. ‘Been awake all day and all night now.’

‘We can sleep when we are dead,’ replied Sylvian as he led them from the room. ‘What weapons did you bring?’ he asked.

‘None,’ admitted Tag. ‘Thought that we were traveling light and fast. Figured that we could set up wherever.’

‘I brought my katana,’ said Em.

‘I never carry,’ added Troy.

‘Well then I have something rather special for the Big Man,’ said Sylvian.

They walked through a large dining room with more grand masters on the walls and then into a study. Wood paneling, Persian carpets, mahogany desk. Sylvian pushed on one of the wooden panels and it slid to the side with a hiss of compressed air to reveal a walk-in safe. He placed his hand on the identification panels and a green light flickered across his palm and then the door swung open. A series of neon lights switched on. The safe was probably as large as a dressing room. Along the one wall were shelves with bricks of cash. Dollars, Pounds, Euros, Rubles, Chinese Renminbi, Indian Rupees and many more. On the floor were piles of different weight gold bars ranging from matchbox sized to flat kilobars and even the large 12.4kg standard bullion bars.

On the opposite wall were racks of weapons. Swords, spears, shields, bows and firearms. Below them, crates of ammunition, explosives and

hand grenades.

Tag let out a long low whistle of appreciation. ‘Man,’ he said. ‘You got yourself some serious cash and enough weaponry to start a war.’

Sylvian shrugged. ‘We have started a war so the weapons are necessary. As for the gold and cash, I have picked lots up over time. The thing is, when you are a few hundred years old your long term investments tend to do very well. Help yourself,’ he said to Tag. ‘Grab a few bars if you want.’

Tag shook his head. ‘No, wouldn’t know what to do with it. Thanks all the same.’

‘Good. Now I have something here that I think would be perfectly suited to you.’ The Frenchman opened a smaller cabinet on the weapon wall and took out two firearms. ‘These were made for me by a man called Frikkie Bezuidenhout. A South African gunsmith who specialized in wildcat weapons. Most definitely the very best gunsmith that the world has ever known. Sadly he has passed but I have these to remember him by.’

He handed one of the firearms to Tag who hefted it appreciably. ‘Looks familiar,’ he said as he wracked the slide back.

‘It should do. It’s based on the frame from an Uzi Pistol chambered for the .41AE round. Except Frikkie beefed up the mechanism, added a compensator for recoil, replaced the barrel and bored the whole thing out so that it now shoots a .50AE. Probably the most powerful standard handgun round in the world. He also made up a twin stack extended magazine that takes twenty five rounds. Just like the original, it fires at six hundred rounds a minute or single shot. However, Frikkie added a three shot selector switch. Pull the trigger once, bang-bang-bang.’ Sylvian picked up a box of ammunition. ‘He also designed this special ammo for the weapon. High silver content slug with an expanding tip. Anything that you hit with this will tear the slug open, forming a six tipped steel flower an inch wide. It will seriously ruin any Vampires day. Here,’ Sylvian handed the second machine pistol to the Big Man. ‘Also, you will need this,’ he grabbed a custom made shoulder holster rig that accommodated the two weapons plus four extra magazines and two pouches for spare ammo.

Tag removed his jacket, slipped on the rig, slotted the pistols in and smiled so widely that it looked as though he might swallow his own ears. ‘Thanks, Frenchy,’ he said. ‘This is one seriously cool gift.’

‘Please,’ quipped Sylvian. ‘Not Frenchy.’ He shuddered.

‘Sorry… Sylvian.’

The Bloodborn nodded. ‘Good then. No time like the present.’ He grabbed a couple of bricks of Euros, a few handfuls of the smallest gold bars and crammed them into a waist bag that he strapped on under his coat. Then he picked a tactical flashlight off the wall and

handed it to Tag. ‘It’s dark where we’re going. You’ll need this.’

Tag nodded, well aware that although Em, Troy and the Bloodborn could see perfectly at night, he would need extra light.

‘Let’s go,’ said Sylvian. ‘It’s follow the leader again.’ And he set off, the others trailing behind him.

The group trooped through the house to a flight of stairs that headed downwards. Three fights down they came to a steel door. There were no fancy ID Pads or scanners here. This door was locked the old fashioned way. Three huge locks and a steel bar. Sylvian took out a bunch of keys and unlocked each of the locks. Then he raised the steel bar, lay it on the floor and turned the handle. The door swung inwards on oiled hinges. The minimal light showed a narrow, spiraling flight of steps going down at a steep angle. He gestured for them to enter. Troy went first, followed by Tag and then Em. Sylvian closed and locked the door behind them as Tag switched on his flashlight.

Without further ado, Troy started down.

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‘I’m exhausted,’ mumbled Tag. ‘We keep going down much longer we gonna end up in China.’

‘Antipodes,’ said Em. ‘You’d end up in the Antipode Islands. They’re part of New Zealand. To end up in China you’d have to start going down in Argentina.’

‘How do you know these things?’ Asked Troy.

Em shrugged. ‘No idea. I told you before, I just know stuff.’

‘Not much longer,’ said Sylvian. ‘Another hour or so.’

‘Great,’ sighed Tag as they kept going down and around, deeper and deeper into the almost impenetrable darkness. The big man’s flashlight started to dim as the batteries gave out but, just before they died completely, the downward spiral ended at a door similar to the one they had entered so many hours before.

Once again Sylvian opened the locks and swung the door open.

They walked through.

And Emily gasped in wonder.

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Chapter 12

Someone had torn two stout wooden doors from their hinges and propped them up against the wall of the cellar. Then they had taken the two Vampires, one male and one female, stripped them to their underwear and, using silver coated steel nails, nailed them to the doors. After that they had wrapped lengths of silver coated chain around them to ensure that there was no way that they could break loose.

The cellar was filled with the smell of burning Vampire flesh as the silver in the chains ate into their undead flesh, burning into them like branding irons.

And on a chair opposite them sat the man who had done the deeds – Sergeant Dietz Muller, a Knight of the *Sedes Sacrorum*, the Vampire hunting arm of the Catholic Church.

The cellar door opened and another man walked in. Bull necked, bullet shaped head and arms like other peoples legs. His name was Otto Reynaud, also known as the Blasphemer. He carried a small tray with two demitasse cups of espresso.

'What took you so long?' Asked Muller.

'This Vamp has an awesome coffee machine,' answered the large man. 'One of those proper commercial ones, you know, with the big brass eagle on the top. Took me a while to figure out how to use it. Here,' he offered a cup to Muller who picked it up and sniffed appreciably before he took a sip.

'Very nice,' he admitted. 'Almost worth the wait.'

'So, any joy?' Asked Otto.

'Not yet. Patience.'

'We will never tell you anything,' screamed the female Vampire. 'You are both dead men. Dead men.'

Muller drew a pistol from a shoulder holster, aimed, shot the Vampire in the face, re-holstered the weapon and carried on sipping his coffee. 'You didn't put any sugar in.'

Otto shook his head. 'I don't like sugar.'

'I do,' said Muller.

Otto shrugged. 'You didn't say.'

'You didn't ask.'

'Please, gentlemen,' interrupted the male Vampire. 'Why are you here? You say that you want information but you have yet to actually

ask us anything. Apart from tying us up and shooting my partner in the face, what are you doing here?'

Instead of answering, Muller drew his pistol again and shot the male Vampire in his right knee.

The Vamp screeched in agony.

'Why do you keep shooting them?' Asked Otto.

'Softening them up,' answered Muller. 'Make sure that they know that we're serious. All of my info points to something serious going on and I simply do not have time to mess about any more. No more mister nice guy.'

'Were you ever mister nice guy?' Asked Otto.

'You know what I mean.' Muller stood up and approached the male Vampire. 'Okay, it's time. Now, we can do things the hard way or…' the Knight paused. 'No, sorry. There is no easy way – it's all the hard way from now on in.'

'What are you going to do?' Sneered the Vamp. 'Shoot me again?'

Muller shook his head, reached into his jacket and pulled out his flask. 'Do you know what this is?'

'Vodka? How should I know what you keep on your person?'

'No. Not vodka. This is holy water. It has been blessed by the holy father himself.'

Both of the Vampires laughed in genuine amusement in spite of their current predicament. 'So what?' Jeered the male. 'You might as well threaten us with a can of soda. Do your worst holy man.'

Muller walked over to the female. 'You see,' he said as he walked. 'Mostly, holy water doesn't work. Even though you are pure evil and this,' he held up the flask. 'Is pure goodness and light. But that isn't the fault of the holy water. It is the fault of the bearer. You see, for the unfaithful it is merely a binary compound that occurs at room temperature as a clear colorless odorless tasteless liquid; freezes into ice below zero degrees centigrade and boils above one hundred degrees centigrade. But for the true believer…' he opened the flask.

The female shrank back.

'He's talking rubbish, Odette,' shouted the male. 'It's just water. It can't do anything to you.'

'As I said,' continued Muller. 'To the true believer it becomes a deadly weapon against all that is evil.' He splashed some onto the female Vampires face.

Immediately her skin began to blister and burn. Smoke rose from her flesh as she screamed in agony.

'The power of Christ compels me,' intoned Muller as he flicked more of the liquid onto her face.

The skin began to slough off in chunks, exposing the bone. But still it continued to burn. After less than a minute the bloodsucker passed

out.

The male Vampire had gone completely still, his eyes two pools of deep terror.

'The hard way,' said Muller softly. 'Now, I need to know where your main chapter house is. I need to know where the head of your organization resides.'

The Vampire shook his head.

'Muller held up the flask.

'Please,' begged the bloodsucker. 'I can't tell you.'

Muller flicked a drop of the liquid onto the male's face where it sizzled and spat like boiling oil.

'Please don't,' he screamed. 'I literally cannot tell you.'

'Are you saying that you don't know?' Questioned Muller. 'That you have never been there? Because I do not believe you.'

'No. I know. I have been there,' groveled the male. 'But I cannot tell. You see, the knowledge is in my head. If I need to go then I can get there, but I cannot divulge the information nor can I lead anyone else. After every meeting the *Capo*, the head of all Vampires, casts a lasting glamor over us. We literally cannot tell anyone where we have been. If we try out brains simply shut down and we cannot talk. If I tried to lead you there I would lose the ability to move. Perhaps I would even die. The true death.'

Muller held the flask up.

'I can't tell you,' whispered the Vampire as he shook his head. 'If I could then I would. Please believe me.'

Muller sighed. 'I believe you.' He capped the flask and put it away. Then, in one smooth movement, he drew his machete and swung, cleaving the Vampires head from his shoulders with one mighty cut. Then he walked over to the female and did the same.

'What now?' Asked Otto.

'We search the house.'

'Big house,' commented Otto.

'Then we had better get moving,' answered Muller.'

'Mind if I grab something to eat first?' Asked the big man. 'I'm starving.'

Muller looked at him and then shook his head. 'You're welcome to look in the kitchen but you won't find anything.'

'How do you know?'

'Might be tea or coffee but that's it,' observed Miller. 'They're Vampires, they live off human blood. Nothing else. So, no food.'

Otto looked embarrassed. 'Of course. Sorry, forgot.'

'Don't ever forget that,' said Muller with feeling. 'They kill to eat. They cannot survive off anything else. So always remember, every Vamp that you meet is a mass murderer. Evil to the core. That is why

we exterminate them. And that is why we do it with no remorse. Now you take the top two floors, I'll take the basement and ground floor.'

Otto nodded. 'Got it, boss. And I won't forget.'

Otto left the room and both he and Muller started to search for any information, pulling open cupboards, overturning chairs and tables and stripping beds.

They found noting until Muller went to the garage. One of the cars, a 1980 Ferrari, had an aftermarket SatNav. He checked the last visited addresses. Unfortunately they had been cleared from the memory but, as he drilled down, he found a list of gas stations that had been marked on route. The furthest one was close to Bologna. Up North towards Milan. It wasn't much but if they had last used the car to travel to the main Chapter House then that meshed with the last information that Muller had gotten.

He shouted for Otto.

It was time to head North.

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Chapter 13

Lights. Thousands of blue-white balls of floating plasma. Many as small as a baseball, others the size of a prize Halloween pumpkin. Some floated at street level, others bounced around the stalactites that hung from the ceiling of the humungous cavern.

Shadows skittered and skipped as the plasma balls played with the light and shade in their ever-moving dance.

The buildings where obviously ancient. Built from large granite blocks. Sturdy and timeless. None were higher than four floors. They stretched as far as the eye could see.

The cobbled streets thronged with inhabitants. Marketers sold their wares, street performers danced, juggled and proclaimed poetry. Food stalls sold kebabs, sausages and sweet meats.

And everywhere were the cats. Thousands upon thousands of them. All noticeably larger than the domesticated animals that Emily was used to. As far as she could see, there were no pure breeds but there was a massive variety of colors and markings. Ginger, black, white, spotted, striped. And the sound of their continual purring thrummed through the cavern like an electronic heartbeat, rising and falling in discernable cadence.

The door that the group of four had exited, opened out onto a landing that was situated near to the roof of the cavern. More steps led down into the actual town.

'Before we proceed,' said Sylvian. 'If anyone talks to us, let me answerer. I have a residence here and am known by many. Emily, remember – pastel blue. Center yourself. Calm.'

Em nodded.

'What makes the light?' Asked Tag.

'Earth magik,' answered the Bloodborn. 'The council manage it. It's some sort of endlessly repeating spell that uses the power of the earth to create light. Similar spells pump the water; provide heating, cooling for foodstuffs, pretty much everything.'

'Do you grow stuff down here?' Asked Troy.

'No. All food is purchased from above. As are most raw materials. This is simply a living space, it has no real economy as such.' Sylvian started to walk down the stairs and the rest followed him. It didn't take long and they were at street level. As they walked the cats wound around their legs, rubbing their heads up against them, purring and

pushing.

Emily projected pale blue and the cats treated her and Troy no differently to anyone else. The streets didn't seem to follow any rhyme or reason in their layout. Some turning back on themselves, others broadening out into small squares full of vendors and yet others narrowing until they became a dead end.

But Sylvian knew his way and walked with a purpose. Ten minutes later he stopped in front of a three story dwelling, opened the door with one of the large brass locks that he was carrying and ushered all inside.

Unlike his above ground house this was dark and dusty and it was plain that there were neither servants nor service that kept it clean and stocked with food. He went to a brass handle that was set into the wall and cranked it a few times.

'Calling some help,' he said by way of explanation.

They all stood awkwardly in the hallway for a few minutes as Sylvian offered no further explanation nor did he invite them to go further into the house. After a few minutes the door opened and a group of tiny people walked in. There were six of them, around three feet tall, long brown robes and curly black hair. It wasn't immediately apparent whether they were a group of males or females or a mix, such was their asexual appearance.

Sylvian bent close to them and had a short muttered conversation. They nodded and split up into three sets of couples, heading into the interior of the house.

'What now?' Asked Tag.

'They're going to give the place a quick clean, stock the larders, ready the beds, that sort of thing,' answered Sylvian.

'Look, not to be that guy,' said Tag. 'But could we sit down somewhere? I don't really fancy standing in the entrance hall for the next few hours while the little dudes clean up.'

Sylvian laughed. 'The little dudes, as you call them, are Urisks. Some call them Brownies. And it won't be a few hours. More like a few minutes.'

'How?' Asked Tag.

'Magik. They used to be more prevalent in human society some four or five hundred years ago. Particularly in the Celtic countries. They would help keep the house clean, churn butter, prepare the fire. All for a little honey and some milk. Nowadays, not so much. Modern man refuses to believe in them and they find that they make a much better living working in the hidden cities. Gone are the milk and honey days. Now they have a union and even though they can clean a house in a few minutes they charge as if they had worked a full ten hour day. Still, it's worth it.'

As the Bloodborn finished talking the Brownies came back. They had a brief muted conversation, Sylvian handed them a single gold piece and they left.

Sylvian beckoned to the group as he left the entrance hall. They followed. The house was rustic but well furnished. It was also spotless. Not a single speck of dust. Fresh flowers in vases and the smell of newly baked bread wafted through the air. Candles burned in wall mounted sconces, throwing a warm yellow light. Sylvian took them to the eat-in kitchen where there was a central table laden with food. Bread, cheese, hams, salads, pickles and jugs of apple juice.

'Is the food real?' Asked Troy.

'Of course,' answered Sylvian. 'They transport it here magically; they don't simply create it out of thin air.'

Emily pulled out a chair and moved it far from the table before she sat down, the smell of the food obviously disagreeing with her.

Tag had already made himself a Dagwood sandwich, layering four thick slices of bread with the various foods and condiments. He bolted it down, barely chewing, chasing every mouthful with a draft of apple juice straight from the jug.

'Starving,' he muttered as he noticed that everyone was looking at him.

Troy laughed and put together a plate of food for himself, as did Sylvian.

'When can we start?' Asked Emily.

'Well, I thought that we could eat and perhaps rest a little,' said Sylvian. 'Then we can start to make enquiries.'

'You said that we can rest when we are dead,' answered Em.

'I know,' admitted the Bloodborn. 'But there are human physical limits.'

'Please,' begged Emily. 'There is some urgency to this. I don't know how long I can keep thinking pastel blue. I'm starving. I can't satiate myself with a cheese sandwich. And if I do feed then there is no way that I'll be able to remain centered. Every bloody cat in the city will be down on me and that would be the end of us.'

Tag gulped down his last mouthful and stood up. 'Sleep is for wimps,' he said. 'I'm ready to rock and roll.'

Sylvian sighed. 'Fine. No time like the present.' He put down his half finished sandwich. 'Let's go.'

The group trailed out of the house, following the Frenchman.

'This lighting is pretty and all that,' noted Tag as they walked. 'But it takes some getting used to. Seems to create more shadow than light. Why can't it just stay still?'

Sylvian shrugged. 'Not sure how it works. Magik has never been my thing. Here,' he pointed at a narrow alleyway in between two rows of

buildings. ‘The people that we want to see are in there. Now remember, I do the talking. Things are different down here. More subtle. You can never be one hundred percent sure who, or what, you are talking to. And you wouldn’t want to inadvertently offend some minor godling that could dispatch you with a fireball or give you the plague. So, be polite and be nice.’

At the end of the alleyway they came upon a wooden door. Brass bound, a large iron knocker in the center and a viewing slot above. There was no visible handle.

Sylvian raised the knocker and beat out a complex tattoo. Seconds later the viewing slot slid open and a large eye stared out at them, blinked a few times and then slammed the slide shut.

The door creaked open and Sylvian walked inside, gesturing for the others to follow. They entered a large room, high ceilings, smoking torches for lighting, polished marble floor. No decorations. The door banged shut behind them and they all turned to see the owner of the large eye that had peered through the viewing slot.

A single eye. In the center of the beings forehead. The humanoid creature stood at well over eight feet tall and was built like an Oak tree. Or perhaps a Baobab. Huge, gnarled and lumpy.

Sylvian held out his hand and the tree took it gently and shook it. It was like a child greeting a linebacker.

‘Good to see you again, Scratch,’ greeted the Bloodborn.

‘Your grace,’ answered Scratch. ‘I see that you have brought some guests. Please don’t forget to sign them in, you know the rules.’

Sylvian nodded and then left the room without introducing Scratch to the others. He stopped briefly at an unmanned reception desk where he opened a ledger and scrawled a few names in. Tag glanced at them as they continued by.

‘Mickey Mouse, Pluto and Daffy?’

‘The club rules dictate that I sign all guests in,’ explained Sylvian. ‘They don’t specifically say that I have to use the guest’s actual names so I see no need to advertise who you all are.’

‘What is this place?’ Asked Em.

‘A club,’ answered Sylvian. ‘Pretty exclusive. I’ve been a member for over three hundred years. The movers and shakers of the unseen cities. It’s pretty stuffy but they serve a good cocktail and if you need info on anything then this is one of the places to get it.’

‘One of the places?’ Asked Tag.

Sylvian nodded. ‘Put it this way, let’s hope that we can learn what we need to know right here in the club. If not then we shall be forced to go to some of the less salubrious places in the city to delve for facts. And most of those places even make me a little nervous.’

They proceeded down a long corridor and into a large sitting room.

Wingback chairs were scattered about the room. As were various other seating arrangements. Large divans, small stools, outsized single chairs and even a few areas covered in mountains of scatter cushions. In amongst the seats were low coffee tables and along the walls stood a score of waiters. The waiting staff seemed to be human, or at least mainly humanoid.

Sylvian went to a table that had four chairs around it. He sat down and raised his hand to call a waiter.

'Four absinth.'

The waiter scuttled off, returning quickly with the desired drinks and put the glasses on the table. Next he placed a silver slotted absinth spoon across the top of each glass, put a sugar cube on top and then trickled some iced water over it. The drinks turned from emerald green to a light cloudy color. He removed the spoons and bowed.

'Thank you,' said Sylvian. 'Before you go, could you please give a message to count Brovnovsky. Tell him that the Bloodborn would like to see him.'

The waiter cocked his head to one side. 'I am sorry, sir. But we have no count Brovnovsky in the club.'

'Yes,' agreed Sylvian. 'I know that. Nevertheless, please tell him that I am here and I need to see him.'

The waiter bowed again and left the table.

'Right,' said Tag. 'What's this then?' he pointed at the drinks in front of them.

'Absinth,' replied Sylvian.

'What was all that thing with the sugar and the water and the spoon?'

Sylvian smiled. 'Tradition. It's a very powerful drink so the water gets the alcohol level acceptable. The sugar is for taste. I suppose that you could simply chuck a spoon of sugar in and then add water but this way is so much nicer.' He raised his glass. 'Cheers.'

The all took a sip except for Emily who turned away.

'Try it,' urged the Bloodborn.

'I can't drink anything except…you know,' replied Em.

'Try it,' repeated Sylvian.

Emily wrinkled her nose, lifted the glass and forced a sip. Then she smiled. 'It's good,' she said in surprise. 'I mean, pretty much everything that I try to drink makes me want to throw up.'

'Except for my tea,' added Tag.

Em smiled again and took another sip.

'Careful,' warned Sylvian. 'It's very strong stuff.'

'How come I can drink it?'

'Apparently it's the wormwood in it. Absinth, or the green fairy as some call it, has been around for hundreds of years and it's very much

considered to be the universal drink. Any species, genus or group seems enjoy it.'

The waiter returned. 'Sir,' he approached Sylvian. 'The count will see you and your guests in the private dining room. I am told that you know the way.'

'I do,' confirmed the Bloodborn.

'Good, sir,' commented the waiter. 'Because I am not yet privy to that information so would be of no help whatsoever.'

They finished their drinks and once more followed Sylvian through a convoluted maze of corridors and stairs, finally ending at yet another brass bound door. Sylvian entered without knocking.

Unlike the proportions of the rest of the club, this room was relatively small. Normal ceiling heights, scores of clean burning wax candles for lighting and in the center of the room, a dining table with ten carver seats arranged around it. The table itself was bare.

At the head sat an old man. In his left eye a monocle, thick gray hair slicked back from a high forehead. A sharp nose above an almost lipless mouth. He wore a dinner suit. When he stood up to greet them his missing left hand was obvious, the sleeve pinned back just above where his elbow would have been.

His mouth smiled at Sylvian. His eyes did not.

'*Duc*,' he greeted the Bloodborn.

'*Reichsgraf*,' returned Sylvian, a smile as false as the counts plastered across his face. 'May I introduce my friends and traveling companions, Tag, Emily and Troy.' Then the Frenchman turned to his friends. 'Count, or *Reichsgraf*, Brovnovsky, an old acquaintance of mine.'

'After all these years, *Duc*,' said the count. 'And you still do not introduce me as friend.'

'To do so would make liars of us both,' replied Sylvian.

'True,' agreed the old man as he stared at Tag, Troy and Em. 'What an interesting group you have brought into our fair city,' he said. 'And also, so illegal.'

'What do you mean, illegal?' Snapped Tag.

The count laughed. 'Oh don't fret young man,' he said. 'Sylvian's secrets are my secrets.' He turned to Emily and bowed. 'Good trick,' he said. 'And powerful too, masking the Wolf as well as yourself. I am impressed, never before have I seen such power. But be careful, there are others such as me who can see straight through your little disguise.'

Emily took a step towards the count and bared her fangs. Brovnovsky jumped back, a look of fear fast replacing his supercilious smile. 'Bloodborn,' he squeaked. 'Control your creature.'

'She is nobody's creature,' growled Troy as he too moved towards the count.

‘Enough,’ commanded Sylvian. ‘Show some self-control. The count meant no insult and he is correct, our secrets are safe with him.’

‘How does he know?’ Asked Em.

‘He is a wizard,’ responded Sylvian.

‘Like Merlin?’ Asked Tag.

Sylvian shook his head. ‘He wishes. No, Merlin is *the* wizard. The count is simply a relatively competent conjuror.’

The count looked upset. ‘Really, Sylvian? A conjurer? That would put me a mere few levels above a magician. A party trickster. Anyway, how can I be of service to you?’

‘We’re searching for someone. Two someone’s, actually,’ said Sylvian.

‘Someone or something?’ Asked the count.

‘Not important,’ said the Frenchman.

‘Fine. Have you got names? Descriptions? Anything that I can start with?’

‘They’re wereWolves,’ said Sylvian. ‘Not sure if they are male or female.’

‘Most probably male,’ interrupted Troy. ‘The Pack is still very misogynistic. Well perhaps not as strong as that, but definitely chauvinistic.’

Emily rolled her eyes.

‘Hey,’ objected the Wolf. ‘Not me, them.’

‘So, two male wereWolves,’ said the count. ‘Oh well that’s easy.’

The group of friends leant forward in anticipation.

‘They aren’t here. At least not in Pareen.’

‘How do you know?’ Asked Sylvian.

‘Because there are no wereWolves in the hidden cities. As there are no Vampires.’

‘Patently not true,’ stated Troy as he gestured at Emily and himself.

‘Pah!’ Exclaimed the count. ‘You two are the exception that proves the rule. What the girl is doing is impossible. Well, I thought that it was impossible until now. Perhaps there are one or two of the elders that could do it. The *Capo* or his ilk. But even that is doubtful.’

‘Doesn’t seem so difficult,’ grunted Tag.

‘Really?’ Questioned the count. ‘It’s beyond difficult. It is taking multitasking to an almost supernatural level. She has got to achieve a meditative state that goes against the very essence of what she has become. Then she has to maintain that state whilst walking, talking and being generally *compos mentis*. As well as that, she then needs to expand the area of her mental influence to encapsulate and camouflage another body next to her. And all that while she is also fighting an almost overwhelming urge to feed on every living thing that she sees. Believe me, it is an achievement that goes beyond

amazing. It is, as I said before, impossible.'

'So they aren't here?' Reiterated Sylvian.

'They are,' insisted Troy. 'As there are guardians in all of the other hidden cities. And there have been for many hundreds of years.'

The count frowned. And looked as if he were about to speak, then he shook his head.

'What?' Asked Sylvian. 'You have a thought?'

'There are rumors,' he said hesitantly. 'Of parts of the city that are cat-free. Everything-free, actually. Long lost areas. Abandoned areas. Just rumors. Perhaps they might be there. Technically it would still be in the city.'

'Where are these areas?' Asked the Frenchman.

'Not sure if they even exist,' admitted the count. 'But if they did then I would look in the lower levels. Deep down.'

'Why were they abandoned,' enquired Troy.

The count shrugged. 'It is said that the inhabitants went too deep. That they encountered the old evil.'

'What, like dark and horrible death, soul eaters, bogeymen? Nasty burning fires? What the hell do you mean' Asked Tag irritably.

'On no,' said the count. 'Quite the opposite. It is said that they encountered primeval sin.'

Emily drew a sharp intake of breath. 'You mean Original Sin?'

The count nodded.

'Still in the dark here,' insisted Tag.

'I think that the count is talking about…the Garden of Eden,' said Emily. 'Man's first sin. The seat of all creation.'

'That's what they say,' admitted the count.

'Bullcrap,' laughed Tag. 'If it were the garden then they all would have stayed, not all left. It be paradise in the Garden. Everybody knows that.'

'I am only saying what I have heard,' said the count. 'I'm not arguing a point. I'm sorry, *Duc*,' he said to Sylvian. 'That is all that I have.'

'It's better than nothing, I suppose.'

'Really?' Asked Tag. 'Search for the two wereWolves in the Garden of Eden. Seriously? Man, once again this all just keeps getting freakier and freakier.'

'Any idea where we can start looking?' Asked Sylvian as he stood up.

The count shook his head. 'I would suggest the ruins. Go beyond them and look for a way down. But that's a mere guess.'

'Fine, thank you, count,' the Bloodborn bowed slightly and walked away.

The rest followed leaving the count alone.

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Chapter 14

Nathan bit back the scream of agony that threatened to tear itself from his throat. It felt as though his blood had turned to molten steel in his veins. An ocean of red hot pain.

This was not the first time that it had happened. In fact, it was the seventh. The first couple of times Nathan was convinced that he was undergoing the true death. No one could experience such pain and live through it. But he was wrong. And more than wrong. Because, truth be told, after each agonizing experience he had emerged stronger, faster and more powerful than before. Metamorphosis through fire. A step closer to reaching the absolute acme of evolution. Darwinism taken to its ultimate extreme.

He had worked out what the process was…it was his body fighting an infection. Burning out the impurities. Now that he was a true *Nosferatu* his physical being had to destroy the hundreds of years of Shadowhunter DNA. He had to be purified, enhanced and upgraded.

So he now welcomed these periodic bouts of pain.

He had spent the last few days acquainting himself with the council of elders that the *Capo* had put above him. And he had come to a conclusion. They were weak. Shortsighted. They were content. And to Nathan, contentment was the ultimate weakness.

He was determined that his brethren would rise up. They would control. They would lead. No more lurking in the shadows. He wanted them to be the apex predators that they should be. That they were entitled to be.

The *Capo* had given him access to vast amounts of power and then he had truncated it by putting the council in as a buffer. But Nathan knew that the one thing that the *Capo* would always agree to was anything that furthered his ambition to find the so called *Potestatum*. The artifact that would allow any Vampire to become a Daywalker. All powerful.

So Nathan has decided to bend all of his attention to seeking the *Potestatum*. He would stop at nothing to find it, no sacrifice would be too large. And when he found it he would present it to the Capo.

'Like hell he would,' laughed the ex-Shadowhunter. With the *Potestatum* he would become…

Nathan Tremblay – the Daywalker.

He was gripped by another bout of agony as the fires that were annealing him started again…burning out the impurities, the weaknesses.

Leaving only the purest steel behind.

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Chapter 15

‘Don’t stare,’ advised Sylvian.

‘Can’t help it,’ replied Tag. ‘Check that dude. He’s got four arms. Sort of.’

‘Two arms, actually,’ said Sylvian. The other pair of appendages are furled wings. He’s a sprite.’

‘Though sprites were tiny,’ stated Tag.

‘Sometimes. Now come on, keep moving, this is hard enough for Emily without your constant stopping and gawking.’

‘You can’t blame him,’ said Em in Tag’s defense. ‘After all, it is like we just fell down the rabbit hole. This place is freakier than Alice’s wonderland. I keep expecting the Red Queen to pitch up, or the Mad Hatter.’

‘Off with their heads,’ laughed Troy.

‘Not funny,’ said Tag. ‘I don’t like jokes involving decapitation. Too close to reality right now.’

As they walked further from the club the buildings began to look noticeably more run down. There were less of the magik light-balls and the streets were uneven with many missing cobbles. Instead of the bustle of street vendors there were more beings lurking in shadowy alleyways, peering from open doorways. Whispering entreaties as they passed by. Selling their bodies as much as the lure of drugs, hard liquor and other nefarious items.

After another twenty minutes of fast walking it was as if night had fallen. The odd light-ball skittered across the roof, casting moonlight shadows before leaving the area seemingly even darker than before.

‘This is the dark-district,’ said Sylvian. ‘Where the nocturnal creatures live and play. Also a bit of a den of iniquity. Keep your eyes skinned. If you see something that looks out of place, tell me. Do not attack anyone or anything without my say-so. Get it?’

The rest nodded.

‘Good. The ruins are through this section. There was a catastrophic fire many, many years go and they simply abandoned that section of the city. Easier than clearing and rebuilding.’

They continued to trudge through the eternal twilight of the dark-district, eyes scanning from side to side like a squad of veterans in Vietnam.

‘We got movement,’ said Tag. ‘Three o’clock. Couple of them. Big.’

‘I see them,’ confirmed Sylvian. ‘Night trolls. They’ve been following us for the last few minutes.’

‘What do we do?’ Asked Troy.

‘You and Emily do nothing,’ urged Sylvian. ‘Stay close to Em. And Emily, pale blue. Concentrate.’

‘Doesn’t seem to be as many cats about anymore,’ noted Tag.

‘There aren’t,’ agreed Sylvian. ‘But there are still many more than you think, in the shadows, hiding, stalking.’

‘They’re getting closer,’ said Tag as he drew one of his massive silenced custom weapons.

‘Don’t do anything yet,’ said Sylvian. ‘They’re nasty characters but they could just be checking us out. Curiosity. Wait for them to make a move before you react.’

There was a flurry of movement and Tag’s weapon thumped twice. The silencer dulling the report to that of a large telephone directory being dropped onto a wooden table. Far from silent but not very loud.

The two night trolls fell to the floor only yards away. Shorter than normal trolls, hunched backed, undershot jaws and massive, overdeveloped arms that hung to the floor. Both had been hit in the center if their chests by Tag’s ordnance. Both were dead.

‘Is that what you call, not reacting?’ Asked Sylvian, his voice tight with anger.

‘Hey, they moved towards us. I stopped them. Don’t come over all pissed with me,’ argued Tag. ‘It may be that I can’t be killed but I also don’t much fancy being on the receiving end of those two boys while they rip my arms off and beat me with the wet ends.’

The Bloodborn took a deep breath. ‘Okay, fine. They probably were up to no good. And rather safe than sorry.’

‘What do we do with the bodies?’ Asked Troy.

‘Nothing. Leave them. The Gnolls will take them.’

‘Gnolls?’ Questioned Tag.

‘Sort of a humanoid hyena. Scavenger. Horrible things but they do have their uses in times like these. Come on, let’s keep moving.’

They carried on walking. Tag reloaded his magazine before holstering the firearm.

It was obvious that they were now entering the ruins. Burned out shells of buildings and piles of rubble.

Close to the roof of the vast cavern flickered a large, dull orange globe. Unlike the blue-white light-balls this hovered above them like an expended sun. A red giant. It provided enough light to see but covered all in a red-orange glow. Almost as if the area was still on fire.

‘The council put that light here,’ said Sylvian. ‘A tribute more than a light source. It is so that any who come here do not forget the fire. Many lives were lost. This fire-light is a constant reminder of them.’

Emily pointed. ‘And over there?’ She asked. ‘All of those flowers? Is that also some sort of memorial?’

Sylvian shook his head. ‘I’ve only come here once before, many years ago and from another direction. I must admit that I have never seen those before. I doubt that it’s anything official or I would have heard about it.’

Emily walked towards the plants. There were rows and rows of them and they stretched over hundreds of square yards. In the center of the field of plants was a small single room cottage that seemed in better repair than all of the other buildings. Particularly the front door that, although dirty and blackened by fire, was upright and sturdy in its frame.

She bent down and smelled a few of the different plants. They were not in the best of condition. The lack of natural light had led to etoliation and they were unhealthy and straggly. But it was obvious that someone, or something, was taking some care of them. There were few weeds and the soil was damp.

Emily started to laugh.

‘What?’ Asked Troy.

‘No cats,’ she answered. ‘Look around you. Not one.’

‘True,’ admitted the Wolf. ‘I wonder why?’

Em pointed at the plants. ‘Rosemary, Lavender, Citronella, Rue and Geraniums.’

‘So?’

‘Cats hate them. The smell of those particular plants is offensive to them. It’s like the reverse of catnip. Whoever planted all of these here did it for one reason and one reason only.’

‘To get rid of the cats,’ said Sylvian. ‘Brilliant.’

‘And I would venture to say,’ continued Emily. ‘That if we take a closer look at that cottage with the suspiciously intact door that we might have found the entrance to the stairs that take us down to the next level.’

‘Let’s do it,’ said Tag.

They threaded their way through the maze of herbs and flowers to the front door of the cottage. Tag tried the handle.

‘Locked,’ he said.

‘I’ll look for another way in,’ said Troy as he jogged around the cottage. ‘None,’ he continued. ‘All windows secured with shutters and no back door.’

‘Curiouser and curiouser,’ said Emily. ‘What say we break the door down?’ She asked Sylvian.

The Bloodborn shrugged in his usual manner. ‘Might as well. Be my guest.’

Em spun around and hammered her heel into the center of the door

using the classic ***Ushiro Mawashi Geri*, spinning heel kick.**

The door literally flew off its hinges and into the interior of the cottage.

Tag inspected the doorframe and nodded appreciably. 'You got mad skills, girl,' he commented as he stared at the solid frame, the industrial steel hinges and the three inch thick Oak door. 'This would normally take a battering ram to reduce it. Respect.'

Em laughed. 'Nice to be able to let off a bit of steam.'

They walked into the cottage, keeping aware. On guard.

A single room. In the center an open trapdoor that looked like it led to a cellar. Sylvian peered down into the gloom.

'Stairway,' he said. 'I'll go first.'

He proceeded down, followed by Emily and Troy. Tag drew his weapons and took up the rear.

The stairway was a haphazard mix of spirals and sharp turns. And like the first one that they had clambered down when they first arrived at Pareen it continued forever, plunging deep into the earth. As they descended it started to become noticeably hotter. Uncomfortably so. Tag kept up a running commentary regarding how tired he was, how hungry he was and how unbearably hot that he was becoming.

And then flashlight flickered and died. It became pitch black.

'Great,' mumbled the big man. 'Now I can't see. Probably gonna fall and break my neck.'

'At least you won't die,' said Troy. 'In fact, maybe you should just chuck yourself down the stairs and hope for the best. Would save a lot of whining and complaining and I'm sure that you'll recover just fine.'

'Ha, bloody, ha,' snapped Tag. 'Not funny. If I weren't so hot I might give you a tight slap. Teach you some respect, boy.'

Troy laughed. 'How? You can't see in the dark and I can.'

'True,' admitted Tag. 'Tell you what, place yourself in front of me so that I can put my hand on your shoulder. I need some sort of guide.'

'Sure.'

They was a shuffling of feet as Troy repositioned himself and the group continued on down.

An hour or so later they stopped abruptly causing Tag to walk into Troy.

'Doorway,' said Sylvian. 'I'm going to try the handle. Be ready for anything.'

There was a creak as the door opened and light spilled into the stairwell causing them all to blink rapidly as their eyes adjusted. Sylvian exited, moving to the side as he did, so as not to expose

himself to anyone or anything that might be out there.

The rest followed and spread out.

The cavern ceiling was lower on this level and there were more of the same plants as above. Rosemary, Lavender, Citronella, Rue and Geraniums. These specimens were even more etiolated than the others, lank, stringy and coarse due to the lack of light.

There were a few buildings. Single story, squat edifices, bare of beauty or embellishment. Simple structures with four walls, a couple of windows and a roof. Much like a child's drawing of a house.

The entire area seemed to be lit by a ghostly glimmer that coated everything, as if the very earth itself was glowing. Brighter than a full moon on a clear day but not as bright as the city above them with its magik light-balls.

Sylvian ran his hand along one of the walls of a house and inspected his glowing fingers.

'It's Foxfire,' he said.

''What?' Asked Troy.

'Foxfire,' repeated the Bloodborn. 'Some call it Fairy Fire. It's the bioluminescence created by some species of fungi that you find in decaying wood. Never seen so much of it before. Amazing.'

As he finished speaking the sound of a low growl echoed across the cavern.

Tag drew both of his machine pistols and Sylvian whipped out his rapier.

Emily's fangs and talons extended and she crouched down, ready to spring at anything that showed itself.

And then Troy morphed into Wolfman mode, growing in size enough to tear his shirt and trousers but not enough to destroy them completely. As he did so the growl changed into a whimper. A lupine form of apology.

Two huge gray Wolves slunk out of the shadows and lay down in front of Troy who stood tall, his lips pulled back to reveal his teeth, his muscles standing out through his torn clothing, his eyes burning gold and red.

Then the Wolves changed back to human form and there were two, middle aged, well built naked men kneeling in front of Troy Wolfman.

'Greetings,' grunted Troy, his voice deep and rough and slightly mangled by his lupine facial structure.

'Forgive us, Omega,' said the one Werewolf. 'We had no idea.

Troy morphed back into his human form. 'I am not the Omega,' he said. 'But I do come as his representative,' he showed them William's seal ring on his right hand.

'How is it then that you can assume the hybrid form?' Asked the same Werewolf that had spoken before.

‘That is not important,’ answered Troy. ‘What is important is that we have come for the *Corona Potestatum*.’

Both of the wereWolves looked puzzled. ‘That is most unusual,’ said the one.

‘Troy held out the signet ring again. ‘That may be but you cannot refuse my request. With this seal it is the same as a request from the Omega himself.’

The wereWolves glanced at each other and then stood up. ‘Forgive us, seal bearer,’ said the one. ‘But this has never happened before. Also,’ he looked pointedly at Emily. ‘The company that you keep.’

‘What about it?’ Asked Troy.

‘Not to put too fine a point on it, seal bearer, but isn’t she exactly what we are keeping the *Potestatum* from?’

‘What are you called?’ Asked Troy.

‘I am Siegfried,’ answered the Wolf who had done all of the talking.

‘And I am Kit,’ added the other Wolf.

‘Well, Siegfried, Kit, not too put too fine a point on it, but it doesn’t matter what you think. The Omega has spoken. Where is the relic?’

‘We do not have it,’ admitted Siegfried.

Troy raised an eyebrow.

‘A representative from Romeen, the hidden city below Rome, collected it some three weeks ago.’

Emily swore under her breath.

‘I am sorry,’ continued Siegfried. ‘We cannot help you.’

Sylvian took a deep breath. ‘Right then,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing that we can do but proceed onwards to Rome.’

‘If you don’t mind me asking,’ said Siegfried. ‘How did you all get here?’

‘Walked,’ answered Tag.

Siegfried looked pointedly at Emily once again. ‘And the cats’

‘We got mad skills,’ said Tag.

‘I could ask the same thing,’ added Troy. ‘I can see how the plants keep the cats away and then the door keeps them out but how do you get through the upper levels?’

‘We don’t,’ said Kit. ‘We have a separate entrance. No way that we could get past all the cats without them knowing.’

Sylvian smiled. ‘Good. We’ll use the secret entrance to get to the surface.’

The two Wolves looked to Troy for permission. The young Wolf nodded.

‘Fine,’ said Kit. ‘Follow us.’

He took off at a jog.

Emily shook her head. ‘Never thought that I’d ever spend so much time around so many naked men.’

Both Tag and Sylvian laughed. Troy looked slightly concerned.

In less than ten minutes they were at yet another door. This one bound in steel straps and kept closed by a stout iron bar. Kit raised the iron bar and opened the door.

'It goes up,' he said unnecessarily. 'Comes out next to the river, an old private cemetery. The door will open from the inside and will self lock when you close it. Don't forget to close it.'

Troy nodded. 'Thank you, brother.'

Both Siegfried and Kit bowed low. 'Our pleasure, Omega who is not Omega,' said Siegfried.

'Hey, one thing,' said Tag. 'What's this *Potestatum* item look like?'

Kit shrugged. 'Don't know. It's in a box. Can't be that big because the box is no bigger than a cigarette case.'

'So the box is locked?' Asked Tag.

'No,' said Kit.

'And you were never tempted to look?'

Both of the wereWolves shook their heads.

'Weird,' said Tag. 'I would have looked.'

The group filed through the door and started their long upwards trek.

Hours later they arrived at the top. Sylvian consulted his watch before he asked Troy to open the door.

'It's not quite night time,' said the Bloodborn. 'Could you check and see if the sun is yet down?'

Troy cracked the door open and looked outside.

'Not long,' he said. 'I reckon ten or twenty minutes.'

'Good,' said Sylvian. We'll wait and then make our way back to my house for sustenance and a rest. Tomorrow we head for Rome.'

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Chapter 16

The doctor pulled the last stitch tight and cut off the remaining thread. Then he covered his work with a sterile bandage that he stuck tight with micropore tape.

The deep cut ran from under Otto's left arm down to his hip. It looked as though it had been cut with a surgical scalpel and had taken twenty-three stitches to close it. Otto had told the doctor that it was a knife wound. No reason to add mental instability to physical harm and try to explain that it was actually a Vampire's talon that had done it.

'There,' the doctor said, his voice hinting at the pride that he felt at doing a good job. 'Now no more knife fights for a while mister…?'

'Mario Rossi,' mumbled Otto.

The doctor raised an eyebrow. Mario Rossi was the Italian equivalent of calling yourself John Doe. 'I see. Well, no physical exercise for at last three weeks. And take these,' he handed Otto a box of antibiotics. 'Just in case there is some infection present.'

Strictly speaking the doctor would normally have to report Otto's injury to the police but Muller had handed him a suitably large wad of cash that had resulted in an instant case of amnesia regarding his late night patient.

Otto lumbered out of the surgery to find Muller in the reception area. He was talking on his mobile and he gave Otto a questioning look. Otto held up one thumb and Muller answered with a nod.

They both headed for the door as Muller finished his conversation.

'How many stitches?' Asked Muller as they both climbed into the car, Muller in the driving seat.

'Lost count.'

'You were lucky. What the hell were you thinking? You do not hesitate like that. You shoot them full of holes and then chop their heads off.'

Otto didn't reply as he settled back in his seat and closed his eyes. He was exhausted. Pain and adrenalin had taken their toll and all that he wanted to do was sleep.

They had been heading north when Muller had gotten a call from one of his remaining informants regarding a Vampire living in a small village that was almost directly in line with the route that they were taking and Muller had decided that it would be worth taking a quick stop to dispatch the creature.

When they had got to its residence and let themselves in they had discovered that the Vamp was a young girl. She appeared to be around sixteen or seventeen years old. Notwithstanding the fact that she was actually over a hundred human years old but had obviously been turned when she was still a young teenager.

As a result, Otto just couldn't bring himself to shoot her and had simply stood, frozen to the spot, when she had attacked him. At the last moment he had reacted but by then it was too late. She had punched him across the room, blackening both his eyes and loosening his front teeth. Then she had kicked him in the ribs, cracking at least two of them and finally, as he got to his feet again, she had slashed him open like a filet of fish.

Then her head had exploded as Muller opened up with his Heckler & Koch MP7, the 4.6mm hardened steel penetrator armor piercing rounds reducing her cranium to a red mist.

They had left the house as it was and Muller had searched out the local doctor and choked his curiosity with a combination of cash and less than subtle threats.

And now they were on the road again.

Otto watched the road signs go by through slatted eyes; barely awake but still aware enough to realize that they were no longer driving the same way that they were before their encounter.

'What gives?' He asked. 'We aren't heading north anymore.'

'Oh, you're awake.'

'Was resting my eyes. Not asleep.'

'That call that I got at the doctors,' said Muller. 'One of my top sources of information. Young man, his father was a priest.'

'Roman Catholic priests can't have sons,' pointed out Otto. 'The whole celibacy thing gets in the way.'

'Yeah,' quipped Muller. 'Sure. Whatever. His dad was a priest, did a lot of work with the Knights. Got killed by a Vamp. Kid hates bloodsuckers so he keeps an eye out for me. Anything suspicious or worthy of note he gives me a call.'

'So what did he have to say?'

'Group of people flew into a small airfield outside of Rome. Night flight. They got picked up by a chauffer company. Limo with pitch dark windows, privacy screens. Drove to a private residence with underground parking. He watched the house for a day, all the shutters remained closed. No sunlight. He's still there and I think that we should pay this group a visit.'

'So? Could be rock stars. Or Hollywood types.'

'He took some photos of them when they deplaned. Ran it through Google images as well as a few facial recognition programs that he has access to. They weren't singers or actors.'

‘What the hell was he doing watching the airport anyway?’ Asked Otto.

‘Kids got connections. Someone phoned him from Paris. Told him about a strange group of individuals that had booked a private plane, insisted on a night flight. He and his associates are always on the lookout for that sort of thing.’

‘So you reckon they could be Vamps?’

Muller nodded.

‘Maybe just a bunch of people with that light allergy thing…what’s it called?’

‘Porphyria,’ answered Muller.

‘Yeah. Maybe they got Porphyria and that’s why they avoid the sun.’

‘There have only been ten cases of extreme Porphyria ever reported,’ countered Muller.

‘Still,’ insisted Otto. ‘Maybe they all got it.’

‘Or they’re Vampires.’

‘Or that,’ admitted Otto. ‘Wake me up when we get closer.’

Muller nodded and put his foot down.

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Chapter 17

Once again the group was dropped off in an underground parking with direct access to the house above. The house was situated in the upmarket Parioli district of Rome.

They had flown to Italy via private airplane and then had been driven from the airfield in a darkened limousine.

'Another one of your houses?' Asked Tag.

Sylvian shook his head. 'A friend. I haven't actually seen him for a while but I have an open invitation.'

The door at the top of the parking access was opened by an old woman. Her gray hair pulled back into a severe bun, small round spectacles and a black dress that buttoned to her neck and flowed to the floor.

Sylvian greeted her in Italian and she bowed low to him before turning her gaze onto the rest of the group. Her expression was one of unveiled contempt for both Troy and Tag. But when her eyes fell on Emily the look changed to barely controlled fear.

Sylvian said something to her, his voice sounded soothing. Comforting. Like an adult telling a child that the monsters under the bed weren't real.

The woman mumbled in return and then left the room.

'Is that your friend?' Asked Troy.

'No,' replied Sylvian. 'She's the caretaker. I've known her since she was a little girl.'

'Not very friendly,' noted Emily.

'No,' agreed the Bloodborn. 'But she's loyal and knows how to keep a secret. Dinner is almost ready, follow me.'

The group walked after Sylvian, following him to a large ornate dining room. Just before they got there Tag frowned and checked the door next to the one they were heading for. Inside was a sitting room, the shutters were closed and a small fire burned in the fireplace.

'I think that Em and I will just pop in here for a short while,' he said, his face drawn.

Sylvian nodded and he and Tag went into the dining room and sat down. Seconds later they heard the sound of Tag grunting in pain. And then his body hitting the floor followed by a gasping death rattle.

The two men avoided looking at each other.

Ten minutes later the old lady wheeled a trolley into the dining room. She removed a steel cloche and banged down huge plates of pasta with clams in front of Troy and Sylvian. Then she placed another plateful at one of the empty seats. She pointedly did not have a fourth plate. Finally she laid out garlic bread, green salad, cutlery, wine glasses and a couple of bottles of Chianti.

Bowing to Sylvian she left the room, pushing the squeaking trolley before her.

Moments after she left Tag entered. His jacket was disheveled and there was a smear of blood on the collar of his shirt. His hands shook slightly as he sat down.

Emily wasn't with him and no one asked after her whereabouts.

They ate and drank in silence.

Afterwards Troy took out a pack of cigarettes and gestured towards Sylvian. The Bloodborn nodded his permission and Troy lit up. Dragged. Stared at the ceiling.

In the background a clock ticked. Slicing away little increments of the now as it counted its way into the future.

Finally Troy spoke. 'We'll find the *Potestatum* soon, big man,' he addressed Tag.

Tag grunted.

Sylvian leaned over and grasped the big man's shoulder. 'Hang in there, my friend,' he said. 'Hang in there.'

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Chapter 18

It was night time and the group had taken a cab through Rome to one of the seedier districts. Hookers stood on street corners, drug dealers plied their trade and users blatantly took advantage of their offers. There was no police presence to be seen.

The cab driver had dropped them off outside a bar. Above the door a flickering neon light named the establishment as *Il Buio,* Sylvian told them that the name translated as “The Darkness”. There were two doormen at the entrance. Both made Tag look small. They took one look at Sylvian and nodded the group through. Tag stared at them aggressively as they walked past.

The interior of the bar was ill lit, smoky and smelled oddly of damp earth with overtones of something feral. As they followed the Bloodborn through to the rear of the establishment the patrons became more and more obviously less human until, at the back, sat a large, squat, hair covered ape-like creature with bulbous staring eyes and hands the size of pillows. It was sipping a multicolored cocktail through a bendy straw. Sylvian nodded a greeting.

‘Hans.’

The creature nodded. ‘*Duc*,’ it rasped. ‘Long time no see. What gives?’

Sylvian shrugged. ‘Just passing through, no real reason.’

The thing laughed loudly, exposing two rows of yellow, rotting teeth. ‘Liar. The *Duc* never does anything for no reason.’

Sylvian tossed the creature a gold piece. It caught it and secreted it away with such speed that it was impossible to follow.

‘Get yourself a few drinks on me, Hans,’ said Sylvian.

‘Thanks, *Duc*. I owe you.’

‘You do,’ agreed the Bloodborn as he walked past and led the others to a door. He pushed a button, stood back and waited. Seconds later there was a subtle chime and the door slid open to reveal the interior of an elevator. Mirrored walls, a single button marked, Romeen.

A piano version of some Barry Manilow song tinkled softly inside.

‘An elevator,’ said Tag disbelievingly. ‘Seriously. They have an elevator?’

‘The council put it in when the Metro underground train system was being built. Back in nineteen fifty-five. Before then it was all spiral stairways just like Pareen.’

They stepped inside and Sylvian pushed the button. Their stomachs fell away as the elevator rocketed downwards.

'And you don't get normals stumbling on the entrance by mistake?' Asked Troy.

Sylvian grinned. 'You've just seen the bar, what do you think?'

Troy nodded. 'True. I don't suppose that it gets much patronage just walking in off the street.'

The elevator stopped and the doors slid open to reveal the hidden city of Romeen.

Nobody spoke for a while.

Finally Tag let out a long whistle. 'Man,' he said. 'This just might be the most beautiful thing that I ever did see.'

Like Pareen the city of Romeen was situated in an underground grotto. And, like the city under Paris, the roof of the cavern was covered with stalactites. And in between the stalactites wandered and bounced the same blue-white balls of magical light.

But unlike Pareen these stalactites were made of the purest crystal. Every structure that hung from the roof refracted and reflected the light in a thousand different ways. An orgy of rainbows flooded the air and the buildings were picked out in a multihued palette of colors, like life as seen through a stain glassed window. The result was beyond breathtaking.

Like the city of Pareen the streets thronged with cats, undulating, purring and prowling in their thousands.

'You got a place here?' Asked Tag.

Sylvian shook his head. 'Truth be told – I'm not that popular here. A few minor indiscretions sometime last century but the council have long memories. Em, light blue, calm, positive energy. Tag, watch the aggression. Troy, stay close to Em. Right, follow me.'

'Where are all of the merchants?' Asked Troy. 'The people. Inhabitants, whatever. Pareen was packed.'

Romeen is laid out differently,' answered Sylvian. 'This is the residential level. Below is the economic district and below that, entertainment.'

'So where are we heading?' Enquired Tag. 'Another contact? A bar perhaps? I nice cold beer would be acceptable.'

Sylvian shook his head. 'I'm taking a bit of a long shot. Strictly speaking you aren't meant to live in entertainment but there's an area on the edge of it that hosts a particular creature that no one really wants in the residential area at any rate so the council turns a blind eye.'

'So?' said Tag. 'How can they help us?'

'They are Cynocephali's. Basically human body, dogs head. They can speak although hard to understand. Quite basic. Meat eaters, tend

to shun outsiders.'

'And?'

Sylvian grinned. 'And they can't stand cats. Mortal enemies. But they aren't Vamps and they aren't Wolves so they aren't banned from Romeen. The hidden city of Pareen invoked some sort of bylaw that prevents them settling there but here, in Romeen, they simply let them live on the outskirts of the entertainment area. I'd give reasonable odds that the Wolves are close to them.'

Troy nodded. 'I concur. Good thought.'

The group walked through the residential area, following Sylvian to a massive sweeping stairway that curved down to the next level. The hubbub and general noise of commerce could be heard at the top of the stairway and, as they proceeded down, the vista opened up to them. Again the ceiling was covered with crystal stalagmites creating a festive of color. Unlike the Pareen markets, these were more structured. Stone cubicles and shops, solid signage as opposed to banners. Less food vendors and more purveyors of fine glassware, cloth and sundry items that none of them except Sylvian could identify.

As they walked through the throngs Troy noticed a shop that seemed to be a small supermarket containing normal everyday human goods like tins of chili, soup and pop tarts. He pointed it out to Sylvian with an enquiring expression.

'Everybody likes pop tarts,' said the Bloodborn. 'And some of the inhabitants of the unseen cities cannot proceed above to shop. Hence the normal human goods.'

'Surprised that there isn't a McDonald,' quipped Tag.

'There is,' countered Sylvian. 'Except that is in the entertainment section. Come on, we turn here, take those steps down another level.'

Again the noise increased as they went down. But this was different. Not the drone and babble of commerce. Music, Shouting. Singing. Groups of people all talking at top volume. Everything louder than everything else. You had to raise your voice to simply talk to the person right next to you.

Tag started to chuckle.

'What?' Asked Troy.

'Check it out,' said the big man. 'She's not wearing any clothes and she's got three…'

'No staring,' interrupted Sylvian. 'And keep well away from her. She is a Lilin-demon. A type of succubus. The Fae can bed her but if a human did you would die.'

'Seriously?' Asked Tag. 'How?'

'You would expire from the pleasure.'

Both Troy and the big man chortled. 'Way to go,' said Tag under his

breath.

Sylvian turned to him. ‘Be serious,’ he said. ‘Death is no joke and if you get too close to her you will not be able to resist her call. So stop looking at her, stop thinking about her and carry on walking.’

Tag looked chastened. ‘Sorry, Sylvian,’ he said. ‘Just having a laugh.’

‘Well don’t. Until I say that you can.’

After almost an hour of walking the crowds started to thin out, becoming less human. Darker. As if they were entering a zone of eternal night. Buildings became smaller, less windows, the doors had more locks on and many had large creatures standing guard outside. Mainly trolls.

And then there were no more cats.

‘We are in the Cynocephalic sector,’ informed Sylvian. ‘But Em, don’t let go just yet, not sure how the dog-people will react to a Vamp and a Wolf. I’m guessing not well.’

‘Really,’ said Tag. ‘You think?’

Em pointed. ‘There’s a whole bunch of them. They’re coming this way.’

‘They tend to travel in packs of ten or more,’ said Sylvian. ‘Avoid eye contact. It can be seen as a challenge. Let me talk.’

The pack approached and one of the larger Dog-men stepped forward. He wore ragged cotton trousers, a leather vest and no shoes. The rest were dressed similarly, both males and females.

‘What you want, blood-man?’ The leader asked, his voice a choppy mix of slurs and growls.

‘Just passing through, Jarrod,’ responded Sylvian. ‘No worries.’

‘Always worries when you here,’ snapped Jarrod. He stared at the others in the group. Then he stepped forward, walking closer to Troy. He stopped. Sniffed.

Troy didn’t move and kept his eyes down.

Jarrod sniffed again and then he growled and prodded at the young Werewolf. But before his finger could touch him, Troy grabbed the dog-mans wrist. Hard.

‘No,’ he said quietly. And then he smiled, allowing his fangs to grow slightly as he did so. ‘Bad dog.’

Jarrod held Troy’s gaze for a second or so then a small whine escaped from his lips and he looked at the floor.

Troy rubbed Jarrod’s head and nodded.

‘How can we help you?’ Asked the dog-man. His posture had changed from the aggressive swagger that he had been adopting to one of servitude. Things were simple in the dog-peoples hierarchy. Basically – the big dog eats first.

And in the scheme of things there was no bigger, or badder, dog than Troy.

‘We seek others like me,’ said Troy.

Jarrod shook his head. ‘They are forbidden. No Wolves, no Bloodsuckers.’ The dog-man stared intently at the floor, avoiding eye contact.

‘Still,’ said Troy. ‘There are two here. Somewhere. And you know of them.’

‘We may not speak of them,’ mumbled Jarrod. ‘They will become angry.’

‘You may tell me of them,’ urged Troy. ‘I have news for them. From their pack leader.’

Jarrod stood silently, his body language transmitting his discomfort.

‘Hey, dog-boy,’ said Tag. ‘Spit it out or so help me I will shoot you in the face.’

Jarrod growled but didn’t look at Tag, not wanting to take the big man up on his threat. He pointed. ‘There. Six hundred yards. Black door in house. Many cat-no-like plants outside. Door only open for Wolf-people. Magik lock. The other Wolf-mans are there.’

Troy nodded to Jarrod and then the group followed the dog-mans instructions, stopping outside a black door that was almost overgrown with Rosemary, Lavender and Citronella plants.

Troy reached for the door handle and the door clicked open before he even touched it.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Follow me. Be ready, sounds like these boys don’t take kindly to visitors.’

Tag drew his weapons and Emily stopped thinking pale blue and let her inner carnivore take over.

‘More bloody steps,’ complained Tag as they proceeded down yet another vast array of spiral stairs.

The stairway was lit sporadically with dim natural gas torches that spluttered and waned, giving off a faint yellow flame. At the bottom was another door. Troy pushed it open and stepped out.

He was immediately attacked, a massive Wolf striking him from the side and barreling him to the floor. Both Tag and Em jumped through the doorway and, before Tag could get off a shot, Emily had launched herself at the second Wolf, battering him to the ground with a lighting series of kicks and punches, each one landing so solidly that you could feel the concussion in the air.

Troy had morphed into Wolf-man mode and had the other Wolf on the floor, his foot on the Wolf’s neck, his claws fully extended, his lips pulled back in a snarl, exposing his three inch long canines.

‘Enough,’ he growled.

The two strange Wolves stopped struggling and turned back into their human form. Both Troy and Em allowed them to stand.

‘Who are you?’ Asked the one Werewolf. He was the older looking of

the two. Over six foot, well muscled, gray beard and hair. The usual golden eyes. The other Wolf, obviously the junior of the pair, also sported a beard and long hair, both a vibrant copper-red. He looked to be in his late twenties. Of course that meant nothing and it was more likely that both were well over a hundred years old.

Troy allowed himself to resume his full human mode and he held out his hand to show them the signet ring. 'I am Troy and I come with direct orders from the Omega.'

'I am Parker,' said the older Wolf. 'This is Samuel. What does the Omega want?'

'The *Potestatum*,' answered Troy.

Both Wolves stood silent for a while. Eventually Parker spoke. 'She is Vampire. Also, I think,' he pointed at Sylvian. 'So is he.'

'So?' Enquired Troy.

'The Omega would never relinquish the *Potestatum* to a bloodsucker. Why would he create a Daywalker when that is what we have being trying to prevent for so many hundreds of years.'

'It is not for you, or I, to assume the thoughts of the Omega. It is ours to do as he commands.'

'I have felt no command,' argued Parker. 'If the Omega wanted me to know I would know. It is that simple. His thoughts are Pack.'

'I have his seal,' argued Troy.

Parker shook his head. 'His thoughts are Pack. I have felt nothing. You are lying.'

Tag pointed his machine pistols at the senior Wolf. But Parker merely shook his head. 'Shoot me if you must, it will do you no good.'

Tag swiveled slightly and changed his aim to Samuel. 'Decision time, youngster,' he said. 'Enjoy a long a fruitful life or die right now.' He thumbed the hammer back. 'You got three seconds. One, two…'

'We don't have it,' blurted the younger Wolf.

Parker growled at Samuel and Troy cuffed the older Wolf across the head hard enough to drop him to his knees.

'Where is it then?' Asked Troy.

'Cluj,' replied Samuel. 'A few days ago. We released it to a lone Wolf who took it to Cluj. We felt the Omegas call. That is how we know that you lie.'

'Lone Wolf?' Asked Troy.

'The Wolf whose death shall bring judgment.'

'Crap,' snapped Troy. 'He's a myth. Doesn't exist.'

Both Parker and Samuel shook their heads. 'I swear, Wolfman,' said Parker. 'He was here. We knew him by his frosty fur and incredible age. Also, the Omega knew him thus so did we.'

'What are they going on about?' Asked Tag.

'The ancient one,' answered Troy. 'The oldest of all WereWolves. He

is known by many names: The Wolf of the Spear. The Wolf whose death shall bring judgment. You may have heard of him by his name, Methuselah.'

'The son of Enoch,' said Emily. 'From the bible.'

'Yes and no,' said Troy. 'Allegedly he has lived since those ancient times. I have always thought him a legend.'

Again the two other WereWolves shook their heads. 'To meet him is to believe,' whispered Parker. 'He took the *Potestatum* and left for Cluj. He said that you would arrive soon but he did not tell us of the Vampires and the big angry man. He merely said a young Wolfman would come and we were to do with him as we would.'

'And what would you do with me?' Asked Troy.

Parker thought for a while before he spoke. 'Truly? I know that you lie but I sense no bad in you. Your honor shines like a beacon. I am confused. But my heart tells me to trust you. We shall show you a secret way to the surface and we shall not attempt to hinder you.'

'Thank you, brother,' answered Troy.

Parker nodded. 'Come, follow us.'

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Chapter 19

Muller waited for the door to open and, as it did, he kicked it as hard as he could. The security chain shattered and the door struck the old lady and threw her back into the entrance hall, sending her sprawling to the floor.

He pushed his way into the room followed closely by Otto. Both had their forearms drawn. Muller's pointed at the old lady while Otto covered the rest of the room.

'Don't move,' shouted Muller. 'Where are they?'

The old lady said nothing, staring at the Knight of the church with undisguised hatred.

'Talk, woman,' urged Muller. 'I can see that you aren't one of them so how can you support them? They are pure evil.'

'You know nothing,' she replied. 'Now get out of my masters house, you pig.'

'Otto, tie her up and put her in one of the upstairs rooms. Gag her, make sure that she can breathe properly but ensure that she can't make a noise.'

Muller waited for Otto to return, closing the front door while he did. He also cleared up the broken pieces of security chain that had fallen to the floor. Then he used his sleeve to buff off the boot mark on the outside of the door, leaving no evidence of his forced entry.

His informant had been correct. The three of them had surveilled the house since yesterday, noting the groups arrival in a blacked out limo. Also noting that all of the shutters and drapes remained firmly closed until after sundown.

Then they had watched them depart using a taxi. It was immediately apparent to Muller that they were Vampires. The girl in particular stood out like a flame amongst flowers, her aura one of danger and, oddly, despair. But it was not Muller's job to wonder the whys; it was his job to kill. And he was good at it.

They had waited for an hour and then Muller had dismissed his informer. He had then forcibly entered the dwelling and now all they had to do was wait and dispatch the evil ones upon their return.

Sometimes the most simple of plans were the best.

Otto came jogging down the stairs and nodded. 'Done.'

'Good. Let's stand behind that door,' said Muller, pointing at an inter-leading door that led to a small study as opposed to the rest of

the house. ‘When they come in, wait for my signal and then we take them out. Remember, we want at least a couple alive to question first.’

The two Knights of the church stood silently and waited, disciplined enough not to get bored or complacent. They both ensured that they stretched every now and then, rolling their necks and alternately tensing and relaxing their muscles to keep from stiffening up.

A little less than an hour after sunset they heard a car pull up outside. Doors opened and shut. The sound of footsteps. The front door clicked. Both Muller and Otto waited, forearms drawn. Tense as piano wire.

The group of four entered, closed the door behind them and filed past the room that Muller and Otto were hiding in.

Muller waited until the last of them had walked by and then he kicked the door open. A large Caribbean man spun around, drawing his weapon as he did so. Muller pulled the trigger of his MP7 and put a burst of 4.6mm hardened steel penetrator rounds through the man’s chest, dropping him to the floor in a spray of blood and gore.

Then both he and Otto covered the other three.

‘Don’t move,’ shouted Muller. ‘These are silver plated rounds. One burst and you will experience the true death. So keep your hands where I can see them, turn around and walk slowly down the corridor and into the sitting room where we can talk.

The three said nothing, simply turning and walking where they had been instructed to. Muller and Otto followed them into the large sitting room and bade them sit down which they did.

Muller took a deep breath and, as he was about to talk he heard the thump of a body hitting the floor and felt the cold steel of a blade against his throat.

‘Change of plans, my man,’ whispered someone in his ear. ‘Now drop the weapon or I slice your throat open so wide that you swallow the top of your head.

Muller dropped his MP7 and then turned slowly to see the huge Caribbean standing behind him, his shirt a red ragged mess of holes.

‘How the…? That’s impossible,’ he managed.

Tag chuckled. ‘Man, the amount of times I’ve said that self-same thing,’ he said as he drew his massive sidearm. ‘Now down on your knees before I shoot your ass. Troy, tie that other dude up before he come around, he looks like trouble.’

Troy ripped one of the drape tie-backs off and walked over to restrain Otto. But as he did so the big Knight stood up and launched himself at the Wolfman, swinging a huge overhand right punch at Troy’s head.

Troy watched the blow coming like it was in slow motion. Then he tilted his head to one side, allowing Otto’s fist to sail by whilst he

stepped in and slammed his open palm into the Knights chest with a sound like an ax chopping wood. The big man went down like he had been shot with a tranquilizing dart. Troy wasted no time securely binding Otto arms and then tying them to his legs so that he was totally immobilized.

Muller looked puzzled, he had never before seen Otto dispatched with such casual ease. Also, normally Vamps would use their fangs and talons on a fight, wreaking terminal damage, as opposed to an open palm strike that was obviously intended to incapacitate without doing too much overt harm.

'Who the hell are you?' Asked Sylvian who had not yet bothered to get out of his hair.

'I could ask the same of you,' countered Muller.

The Bloodborn nodded. 'You could. Do you no good though. Let's face it, you have broken into my house, well, a friend's house, attempted to kill one of my guests and…where is madam Cortnay?'

'Upstairs,' said Muller.

'If you have hurt her,' said Sylvian. 'I swear, you will wish that you were dead.'

Muller shook his head. 'She is tied up, gagged, but we have not caused her any harm.'

Sylvian gestured to Troy who ran upstairs to check on the old lady. He returned within a minute. 'She is fine,' he informed the Bloodborn. 'Tough old bird. I left her in the kitchen making some coffee for herself.'

The Frenchman nodded. 'Now talk to me,' he said to Muller.

Muller thought for a few seconds and then concluded that he could lose nothing by simply telling the truth. 'I am Wach*meister* Dietz Muller of the *Sedes Sacrorum*. The man that you have tied up is my assistant, Otto Reynaud.'

'I have heard of you, sergeant,' admitted Sylvian. 'As I have heard of Reynard the Blasphemer whom I was told was in the Vatican cells.'

'How could a Vampire be privy to such knowledge?' Asked Muller.

'When he is not a Vampire,' countered Sylvian. 'I am le grand duc de Bourgogne, Sylvian Baptiste, Ordre des chevaliers du Saint-Esprit.'

'The Bloodborn,' whispered Muller.

Sylvian smiled. 'Ah, good, you have heard of me.'

Muller nodded. 'A myth. A man born of a Vampire, not turned. Not a drinker of blood but still a creature of the night, hell-bent on revenging himself on the creatures that cursed him. It is said that you have brought the true death to over ten thousand bloodsuckers.'

Sylvian rocked his hand back and forth. 'Perhaps that is an exaggeration, but I have done my fair share.'

'Then why do you conspire with the enemy?'

‘All is not as it seems, Knight,’ said Sylvian. ‘The young man here is probably as far from a Vampire as one could possibly get. Meet Troy. He is a Werewolf.’

Troy nodded. ‘Hi.’

‘And this splendid specimen here is Tagareg. It’s not actually his real name and we call him Tag for short. Not sure what he is but it seems as though it’s pretty much impossible to kill the fellow.’

Tag grunted. ‘Not that you didn’t give it a good bash.’

Muller pointed at Emily. ‘She is a Vampire,’ he said. ‘No ifs, buts or maybes. Her evil is like a blanket of darkness over this room.’

Tag stepped forward and slapped Muller across his face, driving him to the floor. ‘Shut it,’ he said. ‘You don’t get to talk about the girly that way. She ain’t no evil. She be good.’

‘Okay, Tag,’ said Sylvian. ‘Calm down. The good Knight doesn’t know the whole story so I think that we should enlighten him. Muller,’ he continued. ‘If we wake your friend up and untie him will he behave?’

Muller nodded. If I tell him to.’

‘Troy, can you do the honors?’ Asked Sylvian.

The young Wolf untied Otto and then slapped him lightly on the cheeks. The big Knight shook his head. ‘What the hell?’

‘Hey, Otto,’ said Muller. ‘Looks like we might have misread this situation. This here is Sylvian Baptiste.’

‘The Bloodborn?’

‘The same,’ confirmed Sylvian.’

‘He’s going to explain a few things to us,’ continued Muller. ‘So behave. Okay?’

Otto nodded.

And Sylvian told them the story from the beginning, starting at Emily’s eighteenth birthday up until the visit to the hidden city of Romeen.

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Chapter 20

Nathan had tasked hundreds of Vampires and literally thousands of familiars to finding the *Potestatum*.

And like any far reaching investigation it was turning up a lot of false leads. But they all had to be followed up.

His new assistant, a female familiar called Penelope with a degree in statistics and a bent towards designer clothing and pale makeup, was bringing him up to date with the search so far.

'We have a total of four hundred artifacts in the stores. Three hundred and seventeen have been checked by the elders. Four have shown magical properties but, obviously, none is the *Potestatum*. We have also spread our net to include all imports and exports from and to Europe, particularly any that have been conducted under-the-wire as it were. We figured that anyone who is illegally importing ancient artifacts may be hiding something, or at least protecting something.'

She flicked through her iPad and angled it so that Nathan could see. 'Private airports such as these.' She showed him photos. Grainy, taken at night. Private planes being unloaded with non-descript boxes. 'As well as this I have instructed our people to keep a track on the whereabouts and doings of all of the major antique dealers.'

She kept flicking through the photos of airports, train stations, freight yards. Nathan suspected that the slide show was more an attempt to prove that she was doing something than to actually impart any information. After all, one private airfield is much like another. Who cared who was unloading what? It was the contents of the cases that he was interested in, not the process of moving the goods. Something else niggled at him. Irritated him. Probably the lack of progress. He tried to put a finger on it but, after a few seconds he gave up.

'So,' he said. 'You have nothing.'

Penelope scowled slightly but did not argue, she simply kept flicking through her unnecessary slide show.

'Redouble our efforts,' instructed Nathan. 'Money is no object. Hire whoever we need. Saturate the whole of Europe. This is our only priority.'

Penelope nodded, stopped flicking and turned her iPad off as she stood up and headed for the door.

Nathan watched her go, savoring her walk. Smooth, sensual and

controlled. For a human she walked with real grace. That and the fact that she was so efficient were the only two things that had stopped him draining her life's blood. So far.

As she was about to close the door it struck him.

'Wait,' he commanded. 'Come back here.'

Penelope glanced back at him, consternation on her face. And fear, although she hid that well.

'Sit down,' said Nathan. 'Those boring pictures. The airfields. Show them to me again.'

Penelope didn't question why she simply turned the iPad back on, flicked through to the relevant photos and paged through them.

'Stop,' said Nathan. He leaned over and snatched the iPad from her hand. Staring at the picture. Then he stroked the screen, enlarging, centering. Focusing on one particular person standing next to a stretched limousine in the background.

He handed the pad back to Penelope. 'It's out of focus. Can you clear that up? I need to see who that person is.'

Penelope took a look. 'I think so,' she said. 'It's in the background, that's why it's not in focus. It wasn't actually what the agent was photographing. Hold on,' she brought up the keyboard and downloaded a focus magic app. Then she applied it to the photo in question. 'Here,' she said. 'That did it.'

Nathan stared at the screen in disbelief. 'Impossible,' he whispered. 'How could they have let her live? How could she let herself live?'

'Who, my lord?' Asked Penelope.

Nathan pointed. 'Emily Shadowhunter. I turned her. It's protocol for a Shadowhunter to kill themselves or to at least ensure that their colleagues kill them rather than become *Nosferatu*.'

'But, my lord, you were a Shadowhunter,' pointed out the assistant.

'I was turned through choice,' he said. 'To her it was her worst nightmare. It was meant to be a death sentence.' He dragged his fingers through his hair, squeezing his eyes shut as he did so. 'Instead I may have simply enhanced her power.'

Penelope looked away, unsure how to react. It was the first time she had seen Nathan show any real emotion. And it distressed her that the emotion that he was showing was so obviously fear. For if he was scared then she knew that she should be terrified.

'What have I done?' Whispered Nathan. 'What have I created?' He sat down. 'Penelope, make copies of this photo. The girl and her companions. Make sure that everyone gets a copy. And I mean everyone. From now on our primary goal is to find Emily and her friends and neutralize them. Kill them all. Even the *Potestatum* is now secondary.'

Penelope stood and paused for a second, waiting for more

instructions. ‘Do it,’ snapped Nathan. ‘Now. The death of that bitch is out number one priority. Nothing else matters.’

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Chapter 21

‘So let me get this straight,’ said Otto as he pointed at Tag. ‘You have immortality, but you’re not a Vamp.’

Tag nodded. ‘Not sure if I’m immortal, I can’t be killed but maybe I still age. Not sure yet.’

‘Fine,’ conceded Otto. ‘And you are a Werewolf?’

Troy nodded.

‘Where do we stand on WereWolves?’ Otto asked Muller.

Muller shrugged. ‘According to Church doctrine they don’t exist. So I suppose they’re fine.’

‘Fine, and you,’ he said to Sylvian. ‘Can’t go out in the sun, have immortality, speed, fangs and strength but you aren’t a Vampire either.’

‘Correct,’ said Sylvian. ‘I don’t drink human blood.’

Finally Otto pointed at Emily. ‘And you are a Vampire but you don’t want to be and are searching for the *Potestatum* to cure yourself.’

Emily nodded.

Otto sighed. ‘Man,’ he said. ‘One out of four. I’d say that our intelligence reports were a little off. Sorry about shooting you,’ he said to Tag.

‘Yeah, that did hurt,’ admitted the big man. ‘I owe you one.’

Otto grimaced.

‘Well then, it appears that we are, to all intents and purposes, on the same side,’ declared Muller. ‘So, do you mind if we join forces? Seems like we stick around with you we could get to killing a few Vamps. Also, we can be of great help.’

Sylvian looked at the rest of the group who all nodded their acceptance. ‘Fine,’ he said. ‘But I am in charge.’

Muller smiled. ‘Good, I’m sick of making decisions.’

‘First things first,’ declared the Bloodborn. ‘We rest. Tomorrow we find a way to get to Cluj without being seen.’

***

‘It’s a tour bus,’ said Tag.

‘Yep,’ agreed Muller. ‘I called in a favor from a friend.’

It was night and a fine mist of rain filled the air. The sodium street lights glistened off the side of the bus, picking out the blacked windows and the huge neon pink sign writing on the side.

It read – *"The Bojangles Goth Experience"*.

'I hate Goths,' said Tag.

'But it's great cover,' insisted Muller. 'Goth band. Love the night. Black windows. Be as weird as we want. It's hiding in the open. The best way to go undercover.'

'Why can't we simply fly like we have been?' Asked Troy.

'Maybe it's just that I'm a paranoid SOB,' said Muller. 'But I always assume that someone is looking for me. And you. If we work with that assumption then we must remember how easily I found you. If we have a common enemy, and I am sure that we do, then they will be watching private airfields, train stations that type of thing. They won't be expecting us to be traveling as a rock band.'

'How long will it take us to get to Cluj?' Asked Sylvian.

'Twenty four hours or so. We'll leave Italy via Slovenia then through Hungary and finally into Romania. We can sleep on the bus.'

Sylvian nodded. 'It's a good idea. Who's driving?'

'We'll take turns,' said Otto. 'Muller first.'

'Right then,' confirmed Sylvian. 'Let's load up and head out.'

'Like all combat trained troops they traveled light. A change of clothes, bedding, food and water, weapons and ammunition. The bus was loaded in under half an hour.

Before they left, Tag took Emily aside. They boarded the bus last and Emily sat at the back by herself.

Otto sat down next to Tag, pulled out a silver flask and offered it.

Tag took a slug and then shook his head. 'Ouch. What the hell is that?'

'It's called *Eau de vie*. The water of life. It's made in the village where I come from. They get wine and then they distil the alcohol out of it. One hundred and eighty percent proof. Then everyone has their own recipe. This one has orange peels, brown sugar and cloves added. Then you leave it for a year or two, strain it, drink it.'

He took a sip and handed the flask back to Tag who took another mouthful.

'Actually, it's pretty good,' he admitted. 'Once you get over the initial shock.'

'So,' said Otto. 'The Vampire, it feeds off you?'

Tag nodded.

'Man, that's harsh,' noted Otto.

Tag shrugged. 'It's less than pleasant. But it's worse for her. In fact, it's slowly killing her. I can feel her losing the will to live. To keep going. You see, if it were up to the girly she would be dead. Basically we forced her to keep going. We forced her to become the thing that she hated most. We made her the personification of her own worst nightmare.'

‘Why?’

‘Because we love her,’ said Troy as he sat down with the two big men. ‘And I don’t think that I could stand to lose her. Whatever she becomes.’

‘Heavy,’ responded Otto.

At the back of the bus Emily sat still. She could hear every word that Tag and Otto and Troy said.

She could hear the electric clock on the dashboard. The sound of the diesel as it moved along the fuel pipes. Birds outside. Traffic.

Everything.

And she could hear their blood. Rushing through their veins and arteries and capillaries. Hot and red and delicious. It made her sick with desire. She closed her eyes and sank into the chair.

The only creature that she hated more than Nathan Tremblay was the monster that she had become.

She closed her eyes and pretended to sleep. Awake in her very own nightmare.

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Chapter 22

They crossed the border from Italy to Slovenia at some time after midnight. There was a cursory border check and they were waved through. After two more hours of driving they ran into road works, Diversions, one way systems and choke points that slowed their progress to a crawl.

Emily lay down in one of the sleeping cubicles, staring out at the passing landscape. Even with her enhanced eyesight it was hard to make out much through the darkened windows in the middle of the night. Mountains, sparsely populated. Patches of snow.

Eventually she slept.

She woke the next morning to the smell of coffee. The sun was up but the depth of the tinting on the windows cut out most the UV light so it did her no harm at all. The bus was still crawling along but now it was not due to any road works. It was due to the weather. The wind drove the snow almost horizontally across the road. Icicles hung off trees and the sky was the color of pewter.

'Hey sleepy,' called Troy. 'Do you want to try some coffee? We stopped and picked some up when we filled the gas tank.'

Emily shook her head, the mere thought of coffee making her nauseous.

Tag caught her eye and gave her a quizzical look but she shook her head again. She would only feed when she absolutely had to. She knew the pain that she put the big man through and it was almost too much for her to bear.

Otto was driving and Muller's light snoring was audible above the noise of the diesel engine as he caught up on sleep, lying down in one of the opposite cubicles, the curtains drawn shut. Troy had found a Play Station and was playing some TV game involving cartoon worms and hand grenades as far as Em could make out. Tag simply sat and stared out of the window, sipping on his coffee.

Emily lay back in her bed and closed her eyes. Not sleeping but not really bothering to stay awake, hovering in that twilight zone in-between both states.

When she next opened her eyes it was almost nightfall again and Muller was driving. If anything the weather had worsened.

Emily stood up and walked to the front.

'Where are we' She asked Muller.

‘Good evening,’ he responded. ‘How are you?’

Em smiled. ‘Sorry. I’m fine. And you?’

‘Tired. It’s a real bitch driving in this weather. We’re in Hungary. Crossed over a few hours back. They didn’t even bother to check our passports.’

Em peered out at the vista but it was difficult to make out much through the driving snow and the darkness. ‘What’s Hungary like?’ She asked.

Muller shrugged. ‘The church is strong here. Around half of them are Catholics. Physically, fairly flat, a couple of big lakes and rivers, lots of agriculture. The people are a bit like Russians, depressed, dour. Serious organized crime problem. Particularly human trafficking. Sex slaves. Apparently over a fifth of all people trafficking in the world originates in this country. Young girls, kidnapped, made to take drugs until they are hopelessly addicted and then distributed throughout Europe like so much cattle. Forced to become whores for their new masters. Beaten, deprived of all humanity and condemned to a premature death.’ The knight shook his head in disgust. ‘Man’s inhumanity to man,’ he said sadly.

‘“*Many and sharp the num’rous ills,”* quoted Emily.

“Inwoven with our frame!
More pointed still we make ourselves,
Regret, remorse, and shame!
And man, whose heav’n-erected face
The smiles of love adorn,—
Man’s inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn.”’

‘You know Robert Burns?’ Asked Muller with surprise.

Emily nodded. ‘Sort of,’ she said. ‘I sort of seem to know everything.’

Muller raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

‘I’m going to head for some place to stop,’ he said. ‘We need more diesel, food, a break. Stretch the legs.’

A sign hove into view. Budapest 100km.

‘One hundred kilometers,’ grunted Muller. ‘Should take us a couple of hours in this weather. We’ll stop on the outskirts. Any filling station with a restaurant close by.’

The next two hours trundled by with both Tag and Troy becoming more and more irritable as they started to feel hemmed in. Tag stalked up and down the bus while Troy sat with an unlit cigarette in his mouth and studiously ignored everyone. Otto had become engrossed in Troy’s Play station worms game and Sylvian sat upright

and still in his seat as if he were waiting for a doctor's appointment.

Finally the outskirts of the city of Budapest came into view. Scattered light manufacturing centers, large dilapidated apartment blocks and rows of shops.

Muller pulled in at a likely service station that had an attached restaurant. He stopped, exited and filled the tanks with diesel before paying and returning. Then he moved the bus to a parking outside the eatery and turned the engine off.

'Right,' he said, rubbing his hands together for warmth. 'Let's go eat lots of something hot.'

All of them headed for the door except for Tag who hung back with Emily.' Go on,' he said. 'Order for me. Whatever you dudes are having. I'll catch up.'

Sylvian nodded and they left the bus, slamming the door closed behind them.

Twenty minutes later Tag walked into the restaurant on unsteady legs, moving slowly and deliberately, like an old man. His face was drawn in anguish.

'You okay?' Asked Sylvian.

Tag nodded.

'And Emily?'

'She's in the bus. Didn't want to come in.'

'Mind if I ask a question?' Enquired Otto.

Tag shook his head. 'Ask away.'

'You're sort of immortal, right? I mean, I shot you ten times in the chest and you got up and kicked my ass. But after…well…you know…the Vampire thing, you look like you're close to death. What, is it worse than being shot?'

Tag thought for a few seconds. 'Immeasurably worse,' he said, his voice low and hoarse. 'I'm not sure about all Vamps, I only been fed on by one, but it's like they take more than blood, you know. It's like they take part of your soul. Part of the spark that is life. It's like they feed on your essence as well as your flesh.'

'It's not normal,' said Sylvian. 'I suspect that Emily is different, due to her particular make up, her breeding, her family history. An unbroken line since the very first Shadowhunters. You see, the Vamps that we mainly deal with are Sanguine Vampires, blood drinkers. But there are other types although they are exceedingly rare. One of those is the Soul Vampire or soul sucker. Very dangerous, they feed on the life spark. I believe that Emily is a combination of both types. If they drain you dry you become a veritable zombie. A soulless walking undead.' The Bloodborn took a deep breath. 'This is not good,' he continued. 'We need to find the *Potestatum* soon. Or I fear that you will soon lose the ability to recover.'

‘Great,’ said Tag. ‘Well we shall cross that bridge when we come to it.’

As he spoke two waiters arrived with trays of food and started to fill the table.

‘What we get?’ Asked Tag.

‘*Alfoldi Gulyas, Porkolds*, *Tolltott Kaposzta* and *Soproni*.’ answered Otto.

‘What the hell is that when it’s at home?’

Otto laughed and pointed at the various dishes as he explained. ‘Soup, stew, cabbage, beer.’

Tag picked up a bottle of beer and chugged half of it down. ‘The beer I recognize he said. Now let’s eat.’

***

Emily carefully wiped the blood from her face and then changed her shirt for a fresh one. One without a large scarlet stain across the front.

As always, after feeding she felt stronger, her already preternatural senses heighted to a state of superhuman. But mentally she felt like she was literally choking on the darkness that enveloped her soul. She knew what she was doing to Tag. However much the brave Jamaican made light of the fact, she was slowly killing something inside him. Due to his gift of near immortality she knew that he would live…but would he still be truly alive?

She put a leather jacket on over her shirt, more for looks than practicality as she was no longer bothered by the cold. Then she stepped out of the bus into the near blizzard outside and decided to walk down the road for a bit. She simply couldn’t face sitting with the men, seeing them all attempting to act normally with her around, watching Tag flinch whenever she looked directly at him. Seeing the pity on Sylvian’s face. Feeling Troy’s thoughts via her link to all of the wereWolves.

It was all just too much and she needed to be alone for a while.

The wind howled and tore at her clothing and the snow and sleet stung her face. It scoured away her feelings of rectitude and melancholy as it swirled and moved about her. She had been walking for about ten minutes, simply following the road when the lights of a car approached her from behind. The vehicle slowed down as it passed her and she could see two men in the front. Middle aged, swarthy. They stared closely at her as they drove by and then, after a few yards, they stopped the car and reversed.

The man in the passenger side wound down his window.

‘*Mit csinálsz*.’ He shouted above the howling of the wind. ‘*Te egyedül vagy?*’

‘I’m sorry,’ replied Emily. ‘I can’t speak Hungarian.’

‘Is okay. I speak English quite good. I ask if you alright. You got

troubles?'

'Thank you, I'm fine. Just taking a walk to clear my head.'

'Come. Get in car. Is not safe outside.'

Em shook her head. 'No thank you. I'm fine.'

The man opened his door, stepped out and grabbed Emily's arm. 'Please, I insist. Is not safe here. Get in car.'

Emily shook her head again. Then she felt a sharp prick and looked down. The man had a stiletto knife in his hand and he had jabbed it lightly into Emily's side, piercing her jacket and shirt.

'No more to argue,' he said. 'Get in car or I stick you real bad.'

Emily wondered if she should simply tear the knife from him and ram it into his eye but she remembered Muller's talk about Hungary being the center of the world's sex-slavery trade and her curiosity got the better of her. So she decided to get into the car merely to see what these two were up to.

The man opened the back door and bundled Emily in. He followed and sat next to her, his knife still touching her side.

The driver turned to look and then he laughed. 'Blonde,' he said. 'And pretty. We got lucky.'

'Is good catch,' agreed the other man. 'Let's go before this weather gets even worse.'

The driver nodded and set off, heading towards Budapest.

Emily said nothing and neither did her so-called kidnappers. After twenty minutes they began to drive through built up areas. Initially they seemed fairly up market and middle class but, as they continued, the houses became more and more dilapidated and run down until they were driving through a mix of new building projects and forlorn ruins with boarded up windows and tarpaulin covered doors.

The car pulled up outside a four story building that, although run down, looked like some care had been taken over it. The windows all contained glass and the door looked new and sturdy.

The man next to Emily pricked her with the stiletto as he opened the door.

'Hey,' she said. 'Quit it. If you want me to move then just say so. Enough with the knife, okay?'

The man looked puzzled at her feisty attitude and then he simply nodded and pushed her towards the front door. The driver used a series of knocks on the front door, obviously a code. Seconds later the door was opened by a young man carrying an AK47 assault rifle. He ushered them in and Emily was engulfed by the warm air as they entered.

'We had a good hunt,' said the driver to the assault rifle wielder. 'Blonde, American. Very pretty. Found her walking down the road alone in the middle of the blizzard.'

The gun man stared at Em. 'Do you think that maybe she's simple?' He asked.

The driver shrugged. 'Who knows? Who cares? Get her to a room and tell Vasile, I'm going to get some coffee.'

The gun man grabbed Emily by the arm. 'Come,' he said as he dragged her towards the stairs. 'I take you to room.'

Emily made sure that she moved when he pulled. If she wanted to she could have simply stood still, her super-dense Shadowhunter muscle weighing in at around three hundred and fifty pounds even though she looked like a slender athletic teenager.

The gunman took her up two flights and then down a corridor. The walls were painted a gloss institutional green and the carpet looked like it was a leftover from some 1970's casino, a psychedelic mixture of orange, brown and yellow whorls.

They walked past about nine doors until they came to one that was open. Gunman pushed Emily inside and then turned the light on. The room was tiny. A single iron bed. Gray blanket. A chipped ceramic basin in the corner. No furniture.

'You stay here,' he commanded. 'I bring the boss. His name is Vasile Constantin. You will call him, sir or master. Understand?'

Emily nodded.

The man leered at her. 'He will be testing you out,' he made a thrusting motion with his hips and laughed. 'If you get what I mean?'

He closed the door behind him as he left and Emily heard the rasp of a key as he locked it.

Emily waited for a few seconds to make sure that he had left and then decided to take a look around the building. She opened the door by simply grasping the handle and turning until the lock popped and it swung open. Then she proceeded to the room next to hers.

The door was also locked but the mechanism went the same way as she casually destroyed it with a twist of her wrist.

The room was almost a carbon copy of hers but for the fact that there were two beds crammed into the tiny space. The lights were on, a bare twenty watt bulb doing little to dispel the gloom. Two girls lay on the beds. It was obvious that they were both stoned out of their minds. Dark bruises and needle tracks ran down their arms. And their eyes, although fully open, were unseeing.

Emily leaned over the bed and took their pulses. Both weak but regular. She left the room and proceeded on to the next one, smashing the door open once again. Another two girls. But these two were slightly more *compos mentis*. They squealed in fear as Emily walked in and then they both did a perfect double take as, instead of one of the men, they saw instead a tall blonde teenager.

'*Ki vagy te*?' Asked the one.

‘Sorry,’ apologized Emily. ‘I don’t speak Hungarian.’

‘American?’

Emily nodded.

‘Who are you? What are you doing here? If Vasile or one of his men find you out of your room they will punish you.’

Emily shook her head. ‘No,’ she said. ‘They will try to punish me. Now, talk to me, how many girls are there in the building?’

Neither girl answered. Instead they huddled together, their faces masks of terror. Shaking.

Emily pointed at one of them. She seemed slightly older and marginally less terrified. ‘You,’ she said. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Nicoleta.’

Emily couldn’t but notice how remarkably beautiful the girl was, notwithstanding the abuses that she had suffered. ‘You tell me, how many girls here?’

She shook her head. ‘I not sure. Many girls. Sometimes more, sometimes less. They do not let us out of the rooms much. Then once a month or so they take girls away and new girls come.’

‘Where do they take them?’

‘Not know,’ said Nicoleta. ‘It will soon be our turn to go. Once we have been salted.’

‘Salted?’ Asked Em.

Nicoleta nodded. ‘They give us drugs. Even if we don’t want. Much drugs. Then they send men, filthy animals, to do stuff to us,’ she looked down, her face a picture of self loathing and disgust. ‘Soon we do anything for drugs. Anything. We become worse than garbage.’

Emily shook her head. ‘No,’ she said. ‘It isn’t your fault. It is they who are the lowest of the low. Not you.’

Nicoleta started to answer but instead she reeled back in shock and screamed.

Emily turned around to see the gunman standing in the doorway, a look of utter surprise on his face. ‘Is you,’ he said. ‘You not in room.’ He looked at the shattered lock. ‘How you do this?’ he enquired. ‘You got hammer?’

‘For sure, yeah,’ said Emily, imitating the man’s accent. ‘I got big sledgehammer.’

The gun man pointed the AK47 at her and squinted suspiciously. ‘Where you hide hammer?’ He asked.

Emily shook her head. ‘Man,’ she said. ‘You definitely win the stupid prize.’

‘Please,’ begged Nicoleta. ‘Do not make him angry. He will punish us all.’

‘No ways, sweetheart,’ said Emily. ‘His punishing days are over. Trust me on that.’

The gun man stepped forwards. ‘On your knees, bitch.’

‘What’s your name?’ Asked Emily.

‘Get on knees,’ shouted the gun man in return. ‘Now.’

‘First tell me your name.’

The gun man looked puzzled as the absurdity of the situation got to him. ‘Is Eugen, why?’

‘I think that it’s only polite to know a man’s name before you kill him,’ said Emily.

Eugen stepped forward and raised the AK47 jabbing it at Emily’s face in an attempt to smash the barrel into her temple.

It was the last thing that he ever did.

Blood sprayed from his ruined throat as Emily slashed it wide open, tearing away his veins, arteries and esophagus in a welter of gore.

She caught the gun before it hit the floor, checked that it had a round in the chamber and then swung it over her shoulder, hanging by the leather strap.

Behind her both of the girls whimpered in terror.

‘You girls stay here,’ said Emily. ‘I’m going to take a look around, take some names and kick some butt.’

The Shadowhunter ghosted out of the room and down the corridor. For the first time since she had been bitten Emily walked with a purpose. She was doing some good and it filled her with righteous ire. She may be *Nosferatu*, she may have to feed off human blood and she may be the incarnation of darkness but, by God, she was not going to allow what was happening in this building to continue. And as she walked down the corridor she vowed that her quest would not stop there.

The criminal underworld of Budapest was in for a rude awakening.

She swung the AK47 off her shoulder and carried it at half port, ready to rock and roll.

A door at the end of the corridor burst open and two armed men stepped out. Before they could react, Emily shot them both in the head, the noise of the assault rifle thundered through the building like the wrath of God.

An alarm sounded, high pitched shrieking as it stridently called the gangsters to arms.

She could hear women screaming. Men shouting. Footsteps running down stairs and corridors.

Emily thought about waiting in the corridor and then taking them out as they entered. But that would likely bottle her in as she was sure that after she dispatched the first couple the rest would back off and wait. Or worse, throw in a couple of grenades. She wasn’t up to speed with what ordnance they possessed or even how many of them there were so she decided to take the attack to them.

She stalked to the end of the corridor and listened. She could detect multiple heartbeats and had to concentrate to separate them. The girls were easy to filter out, their pulses racing but weaker than the men who were high on adrenalin as opposed to drugs. At least six thugs upstairs and another four below.

The sound of footsteps muffled by carpet. Moving slowly. Carefully in an attempt to be silent. Two men climbing the stairs from below, not realizing that there is no such thing as silence to someone with Emily's enhanced senses.

Em waited until they were almost at the top of the flight, ready to step onto the landing and then she stepped out, lined them up and shot them both in the chest. Two double taps.

Their lifeless bodies tumbled back down to the ground floor. They both carried pistols and Emily scooped them up, slid them into her belt and ran back up the stairs. They were both Tokarev TT-30's. Crappy relics from the Second World War. But a weapon is a weapon and Emily knew that the more firepower she had, the better.

She detached the AK's magazine and checked how many rounds were left. It was a twenty round mag as opposed to the usual thirty rounds. She had used six so had fourteen left. She rammed the mag back knowing that she would have to conserve her ammo.

Then she lay on the floor and popped her head around the corner of the landing. Two more men were crouched at the bottom of the stairs. Both carried short submachine guns and as soon as they saw her they let rip. Slugs ricocheted off the walls and splintered the brick work as Emily rolled out of the way.

She heard someone coming down the stairs and knew that the thugs above her were taking advantage of the gunfire to attack. She raised her weapon and, as two men came running into view she opened fire, hitting them in the legs. They tumbled down and she sprang to her feet, ran over to them and quickly dispatched them, breaking their necks with practiced ease.

There was a lull in the fight and then the men at the bottom stated shouting to the men above. Obviously discussing what to do next but it did Emily no good as she couldn't understand them.

Eventually someone shouted from above her.

'Hey, who are you?'

Emily decided that answering would do her no good so she simply kept quiet.

'I'm talking to you,' the man continued. 'But if you don't want to answer me that's fine, have it your way.'

Emily heard a muffled confab as the men above her discussed their next move. There was the sound of a door opened and then she heard a girl whimpering in fear.

A shot rang out and a body was thrown down the stairs to land in a crumpled heap at the bottom. A mere few feet from Emily. It was a young girl. Like the others that Em had seen she had track marks on her arms and she was scantily dressed. Unlike the others, she had been shot in the head.

'Every twenty seconds that you don't answer I will kill another one,' informed the voice from above. 'Now, who are you and who are you working for?'

Emily took another look at the dead girl. Blood pooled on the floor under her head. She was still a child. Younger than Emily herself.

And the world seemed to shift.

Emily stood up and walked to the stairs. Eschewing any plan she simply stood at the top, shouted and then slipped the fire select mode to full auto.

'Hey. Get some.'

Both of the men opened fire as did she. Lead slugs cracked and whistled past her and she felt a slight tug as two of them struck. One in her upper thigh and the other in the side of her torso. She burned off her remaining fourteen rounds in just over two seconds, ripping into the two thugs, killing them instantly.

Then she dropped the assault rifle, drew her two pistols, turned and sprinted up the stairs, her injuries already healing as she ran.

There was nothing that the remaining four gangsters could do. Emily was simply moving too fast. Their meager mortal senses barely had time to register a mere streak of color and a thunder roll of gunshots before they fell to the floor, victims of multiple gunshot wounds.

All except for one of them. The man who had shouted his question to Emily. The man who had killed the young girl.

Emily disabled him swiftly by snap kicking him savagely in both of his knees, smashing them like dry firewood and dropping him to the floor. Then she casually grabbed his pistol from him, snapping his wrist as she did so.

He keened in agony as the pain from his massive injuries washed over him.

Emily waited for him to calm down before she spoke. 'Vasile Constantin?'

He looked up at her, tears running down his face. 'Please,' he gasped. 'A doctor, for the love of God.'

'Are you Vasile Constantin?' Asked Em again.

He nodded.

'So you run this place? This is your set up?'

The human trafficker stared at Emily for a few seconds before he decided that perhaps she might be merciful if he cooperated fully. He shook his head. 'No,' he denied. 'I am just a soldier. A nothing. A

caretaker, if you will. There are another four such establishments dotted around the city. They are controlled by the Foldessy Family. Powerful men. I fear that you have made a big mistake. Now, please, I have cell phone here, use it to phone doctor for me.'

Emily shook her head. 'Where were the doctors for these girls? Tell me, where are the Foldessy Family based?'

Despite his pain Vasile started to laugh, a low grating sound. 'Why? You think that you can fight them?'

Emily went down on one knee, brought her face close to Vasile's and then bared her fangs, allowing them to grow in front of him. Then she growled.

The gangster almost fainted in fear. '*Istenem segits*,' he whispered. 'God help me. What are you?'

'I am death,' said Emily. 'Now where can I find the Family headquarters?'

As she spoke she heard the sound of vehicles pulling up in the street outside. Many vehicles.

'There is no need,' whispered Vasile. 'When you attacked us and we set of the alarm, it also sounds in the Family headquarters. Those cars that you hear, that is them. And even you, the very devil itself, cannot stand against the Foldessy's. There are too many and they are too powerful. They are an army.'

Emily stood, went over to the window and looked down at the street. At least ten cars and SUV's had arrived. And out of them jumped men. Men dressed in black combat gear like a SWAT team. Automatic weapons, machine guns, grenade launchers. Thirty, maybe forty of them.

'Oh, crap,' mumbled Emily.

'Vasile laughed out loud. 'Yes,' he agreed. 'Oh very much crap for you. But if you treat me well then perhaps they will be lenient to you. Do me no more harm and I will put in good word for you. Okay? You agree?'

Emily walked over to the trafficker of young girls, grabbed him by the throat and threw him out of the window as hard as she could.

In the street below the gathering forces saw a man come crashing through the window, sail through the air and smash heavily into the opposite building some twenty yards away before bouncing back to land in the middle of the icy street, the body limp and broken like a sack of rotten fruit.

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Chapter 23

Troy came running back into the restaurant. ‘She’s not there,’ he blurted out. ‘She’s gone.’

‘Hold on,’ said Sylvian. ‘Calm down. What do you mean she’s gone?’

‘I went out for a smoke and decided to check on Emily. She wasn’t in the bus. She’s not in the restroom, or the shop. I even climbed onto the top of the bus and I couldn’t see her anywhere. She’s gone.’

‘People don’t simply disappear,’ said Muller. ‘I’m sure that you just missed her. Maybe at the back of the shop, somewhere like that.’

Troy shook his head. ‘I don’t miss things. I can smell her from over two hundred yards away. I can smell you all. Trust me, she wasn’t in the shop.’

‘Well then can you track her?’ Asked Tag.

The Wolfman shook his head. ‘Normally but this blizzard puts a stop to that. Too much snow, too much wind. No tracks, no scent. It’s impossible.’

‘Come on,’ said Sylvian. ‘Let’s all go take a look for her.’

‘I’ll question the shop clerks and the service station attendants,’ said Muller. ‘I suspect that I’m the only one that can speak Hungarian.’

There were general nods of agreement except from Sylvain.

‘I actually do,’ he said. ‘But I’m not sure if anyone would understand the archaic structure that I use, after all, I learned it back in the Humanistic era and haven’t had need to speak it since.’

‘Meet back at the bus in twenty minutes,’ said Troy.

The group split up and started to search in all possible directions.

Twenty minutes later they were back in the bus.

‘Right,’ said Troy. ‘Something has happened to her. I don’t know what but someone around here must know.’

‘I questioned everyone,’ said Muller. ‘No one saw her.’

‘Maybe we need to question them a little harder,’ suggested Troy, his face pale with anger and worry.

‘Calm down, young Wolf,’ said Sylvain. ‘You aren’t thinking properly.’

‘I’m thinking well enough,’ shouted Troy. ‘Well enough to know that we need to do something right now, or do you favor simply sitting on your ass and waiting.’

Sylvian stood up and faced the Wolfman, his eyes like two black holes in the snow. Portholes into the abyss. ‘Watch your tone, boy,’ he

snapped. ‘Do not forget who you are talking to. I shall let your insult ride because I know that you are worried. We all are. Now stop panicking, think. Clear your mind.’

‘I’m sorry, Sylvian,’ apologized Troy. ‘Truly, I meant no disrespect. It’s just that I feel so helpless.’

‘You are far from helpless, Wolfman,’ returned the Bloodborn. ‘In fact, if you had thought things through before you went off like a Fourth of July firework you would have realized that you are actually the only one who can tell us where she is. You are the only one who has any possibility of connecting with her.’

Troy looked shamefaced. ‘That’s true,’ he admitted. ‘All of the Wolves can communicate with her over distance but I don’t think that I can institute the bridge. The contact has to come from her.’

‘Are you sure?’ Insisted Sylvian.

‘I think so,’ said Troy. ‘Well, it always has. But then, in all fairness, I’ve never really tried.’

‘Don’t you think that you should?’

Troy nodded. ‘How?’

‘Sit down. Relax, even though it is difficult to do you must seek your center. Seek the eye of the storm. Calm.’

Troy sat down on one of the bus seats, took a deep breath and let the tension flow from him.

‘Clear your mind,’ said Sylvian. ‘A blank canvas. White. Pure.’

The Wolfman nodded.

‘Fine,’ continued the Bloodborn. ‘Now think of Emily. Fill your mind with her. Her voice, her smell, her expressions.’

Troy pointed. ‘She went that way. Towards Budapest.’

Sylvian patted the young Wolf on the shoulder. ‘Well done, now do not lose concentration. Keep your mind on her at all times. Muller, you drive. Otto, there may be a simple explanation, although I can’t think of one, but just in case there’s trouble, can you and Tag do a weapons check?’

Both of the big men nodded and got to work, laying out ammunition, loading it into magazines and preparing the rest of their ordnance.

Muller drove efficiently and as fast as he could in the snow, following Troy’s curt directions.

Suddenly Troy’s eyes flew open. ‘She’s in danger,’ he said. ‘But we’re getting close, I can feel it.’

‘See if you can go any faster,’ said Sylvian to Muller. ‘Obviously don’t push it so hard that we crash.’

‘Obviously,’ returned Muller as he pushed a little extra speed out of the bus, heading as fast as he could towards Emily.

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Chapter 24

Emily quickly checked the bodies for weapons and ammunition. They all carried Tokarev pistols. Two of them had extra magazines in their jackets. She ejected the magazines, pocketed them all along with the extras and reloaded two of the pistols. She recalled that the two gangsters downstairs had submachine guns but there was no time to collect them.

So, two pistols and six 8 round magazines. Forty eight shots. Not nearly enough.

And then there was the safety of the girls in the building to think about. She was sure that the Foldessy Family army would simply come in with guns blazing and that would definitely result in collateral damage, killing and wounding many of the innocent girls.

It didn't take her long to make a decision. Tucking the two pistols into her belt, she looked at the open window that she had thrown Vasile through and judged the distance to the opposite building to be around twenty yards or so. The building itself seemed to be an abandoned office block. Six stories high, some of the windows boarded up. No lights. So no people to suffer from collateral damage.

With a deep breath Emily sprinted at the window and jumped.

Her Shadowhunter/Vampire strength took her sailing across the gap like it was a mere hop through a doorway. She smashed into a window and barreled through, rolling when she hit the floor.

The men below watched her jump with disbelief. But they were obviously professional and recovered quickly, grouping together and heading for the entrance to the building that Emily had just entered.

To be honest, Emily had no further plan beyond moving buildings so she simply ran over to the window, drew her pistols, aimed and fired.

Two of the men went down but the rest retaliated with a withering quantity of firepower. The wall around the window cracked and crumbled, the ceiling fell in and Emily was struck by multiple fragments of mortar and glass.

She squeezed off another volley shots and then sprinted from the room, moving so fast it looked like stop motion photography, down the corridor and into another, figuring to keep moving in order to make herself a more difficult target.

She ran to the window, fired again and left the room at speed. Another armed thug fell to the floor as the rest opened fire,

devastating the room that Emily had just vacated.

As she ejected the two empty magazines and reloaded, Emily pondered what to do next. She wasn't that worried about being caught by the assailants as she reckoned that she could jump to the adjacent building and then across to another street before they made it upstairs. But she knew that, as soon as she left, the Family would scoop up the girls and either move them, sell them off or even kill them as they knew too much.

So she had to stay and fight. The sound of footsteps running up the stairs informed her that the first proper attack had started. Em listened closely and figured that they had sent five men into the building. She glanced out of a window and her assumption was confirmed as she saw the rest of the crew crouched behind cars, weapons pointing at the building to prevent her escape.

Once again Emily scorned any sort of subtlety and relied on her superhuman speed and reaction time. Sprinting to the first floor landing she arrived as the five men turned the corner. Firing both pistols at once she burned off all sixteen shots, taking down four of the intruders.

The fifth man managed to get a shot off as he dove to the ground for cover. The slug creased Emily's shoulder and slammed into the wall behind her. Em cocked her arm and threw one of the pistols at him. It whistled through the air and smashed into the bridge of his nose, crushing the cartilage and driving the bone upwards and into his brain, killing him instantly.

Then she retrieved the pistol, ejected the empties and reloaded with her last two full magazines, cursing under her breath as she did so. If only she had more weapons then she could take the fight to the Family as opposed to taking them on piecemeal like she was forced to do at the moment.

Not that it mattered, she thought to herself. She fully expected them to all attack at once now that the first incursion had failed.

In preparation for the final assault Emily ran up the stairs to the roof and peered down at her assailants, pistols ready. She figured that she would take out as many as possible and then jump back to the original building and try to kill some more of them and protect the girls at the same time. It was a plan. Not a good plan but at least it was a plan.

As she was mulling it over in her mind and checking out the men in the street her reverie was shattered by a series of explosions. Two of the cars went up in gouts of flame and then the avenue below was wracked with automatic gunfire that came from both ends of the street.

Em glanced down the road and saw Otto, Muller and Tag running at the assailants, all three had submachine guns and they were pouring a

storm of fire into the Family army.

Coming from the other entrance to the street she saw Sylvian. Instead of his usual rapier the Bloodborn carried two semi auto pistols. He did not run. Instead he walked in a brisk and calm manner, firing as he came, his shots deadly accurate.

And then she saw Troy. At the same time that the black clad soldiers did. He had assumed his Wolfman mode. Seven foot tall, shredded shirt and trousers hanging from his massively muscled body in tatters. A nightmare of hair and teeth and claws.

He attacked, running in huge jumping bounds he cleared the cars, springing twenty feet into the air and coming down amongst the combatants, tearing and, ripping and killing. The soldiers completely lost their discipline and ran as the monster rampaged through their ranks, growling and howling as he did so.

But running did them no good as Tag, Otto and Muller cut down anyone who came their way and Sylvian took care of the rest.

Emily projected her thoughts toward Troy, mentally shouting to get his attention.

'Troy.'

'Emily,' he pulsed back. 'You're safe.'

'I am. Thanks to you guys. Look, Troy,' she continued. 'Keep at least one alive. Preferably someone who looks like and officer or boss of some sort. I need to question him.'

The Werewolf gave her the mental equivalent of a nod and continued to wreak havoc, breaking necks and severing arteries.

Within seconds it was all over. The street looked as though it had taken a direct hit from an airstrike. Or a Tomahawk missile. Cars were burning, bodies and body parts lay everywhere and the pebbled surface literally ran with blood.

Emily ran downstairs to greet her friends.

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Chapter 25

Nathan's new lieutenant, the Bloodwraith Petrus Rankin, knocked and then entered without waiting for an answer; such was his excitement at the news.

'My lord,' he greeted Nathan. 'We have found them.'

Nathan stared at Petrus, his eyes two pools of unforgiving darkness. His aura of authority a palpable thing. The Bloodwraith almost buckled at the knees such was Nathan's power.

'Did I give you permission to enter?'

The Bloodwraith shook his head. 'No, my lord. I apologies. My enthusiasm caused me to overstep my boundaries.' He waited, eyes cast downwards, holding his breath. Knowing that his very life hung in the balance. Lord Nathan was not known for his forgiving attitude and he had killed many for much less.

And then the ex-Shadowhunter/Vampire smiled. 'You are forgiven. Tell me of this news that has excited you to the point of insolence.'

'Emily Shadowhunter, lord. We have found her. And the group that she is traveling with.'

'Where?' Demanded Nathan.

Budapest, lord. In Hungary.'

'I know where Budapest is, moron. Are we sure that it's them? How did we find them?'

'We have just received a report from one of our familiars in area VIII, Budapest. A pimp, runs a few girls on the streets, he says that out targets have just declared war on the Foldessy family.'

'The Foldessy Family,' said Nathan. 'Aren't they the slave traders. Sex slaves, that sort of thing? We buy food-stock off them sometimes if memory serves.'

'That's them, lord,' agreed the Bloodwraith.

'So? What does he mean and how does that help us to identify them?'

'They have just attacked one the Foldessy's salting houses and then wiped out the reaction team that arrived to stop them. Full on war in the streets. Machine guns, grenades, blood soaked pavements. The real deal, my lord. Many witnesses saw them and they are all agreed that it's the people that we are looking for.'

Nathan smiled. Well done. Now, quickly, gather fifty Bloodwraiths together, full kit. Also organize one of our commercial jets. We fly to

Budapest as soon as, with a private jet it should take us just over an hour. I shall be coming with. Also, I will make sure that we have suitable transport awaiting our arrival. Move, this is the break that we have been seeking.'

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Chapter 26

The only thug that remained alive, lay on the floor, his face a mask of terror as the huge Wolfman loomed over him, growling softly. And then a girl ran up. Tall, blonde hair, flawless complexion. Hardly any makeup but still one of the most beautiful young woman the man had ever seen. She was like an angel in the midst of hell.

'Please,' he croaked. 'Help me. Don't let them kill me. Show mercy.'

She knelt next to him and leaned in close. Then he saw her fangs. Long, glittering. Deadly.

He screamed once as she took his right arm and casually broke his wrist in two places. Shattered bone poked out of his flesh, Dull white. Coated in blood.

'You dare to ask for mercy,' spat Emily. 'When you trade in misery and despair.'

The man whimpered, shaking in fear.

'Who are you?' Asked Emily.

'Alfred Biro.'

'Not one of the Foldessy's?'

He shook his head. 'I am a member of the family,' he said. 'But not actually family. Not by blood.'

'Tell me, Alfred,' continued Emily. 'The other salting houses, where are they?'

'Scattered throughout the city,' answered the thug.

'Addresses,' stressed Emily.

Alfred stammered out four addresses while Muller wrote them down.

'Good,' said Emily. 'Now, the Foldessy headquarters. Where are they, how many people are there guarding it and what sort of resistance can we expect?'

Alfred shook his head. 'No,' he said, his fear of the Foldessy family momentarily overcoming his fear of the Vampire and the Wolfman.

Emily grabbed his broken arm and squeezed, grinding the smashed shards of bone together as she did so. 'Tell me.'

The thug screamed in agony but Emily was unrepentant. 'Tell me,' she repeated.

Through gritted teeth he gave another address.

'How many?' Questioned Emily.

'Thirty or so. Well armed. Assault rifles, grenades, claymore mines at access points. High walls with electric fencing. Dogs. Lots of dogs, bad

ones. Guard at the main gate. That's all I know. Please, that's it.'

Emily released his arm and stood up. 'Right, we hit the salting houses first, kill the guards, release the girls, tell the cops. Then we take out the head of the snake.'

Sylvian shook his head. 'Or not,' he said.

'What?' Exclaimed Emily. 'What do you mean?'

'Look, Em, this is a terrible thing that is happening here,' explained the Bloodborn. 'But it is not our fight. We need to find the *Potestatum*. That is our primary, our only goal. It is all important.'

Emily stared at the French man and then she grabbed his arm and started walking, pulling him after her, dragging him into the salting house where the girls were imprisoned. She yanked him up the stairs to Nicoleta's room. On the way she pointed out the dead girl on the stairs. 'Killed because I wouldn't answer the main guard,' she said.

Then she opened the door to Nicoleta's room. The two girls were huddled in the corner, arms around each other as they cried tears of fear. The single open light bulb picked out the needle tracks on their arms, the bruises on their thighs, their swollen, bleeding lips.

'There are at least another twenty girls like this or worse in this place alone. Another four houses means upwards of one hundred girls. I will not let that happen. This stops today, with or without you.'

'I agree,' said Troy who had followed them up the stairs. 'We cannot let this stand. It's inhumane.'

Sylvian nodded. 'I will inform the police. They will take care of it,' he said. 'But we cannot get involved. The fate of the world rests with us. This is a horrible thing but we are not the bodyguard of all morality. We are Vampire hunters and we need to find the *Potestatum*.'

Emily went over to the two girls and knelt next to them, stroking their hair and comforting them. Telling them that were now safe.

Troy gestured to Sylvian to step out of the room so that he could speak to him.

'She needs this,' whispered the Wolfman. 'Not only is it a moral imperative for us to help, it is necessary for Emily. She sees herself as a monster. A killer. A taker of lives. Now she has a chance to redeem herself and I, for one, am going to help her. So will Tag, I am sure. Not sure about the church dudes, they have their own agenda.'

Sylvian thought for a few seconds and then nodded. 'You are correct, young Wolf,' he admitted. 'Sometimes I lose sight of my own humanity. We must help. I shall ask Muller and Otto what they want to do, but whatever, we are a team.'

The two of them clasped hands and then went back into the room.

'We can look for the *Potestatum* after we have sorted this out,' said Sylvian. 'We hit the houses and call the police to clean up and help the girls.'

‘You can’t call the police,’ said Emily.

‘Why?’ Asked Sylvian.

‘Nicoleta says that the police come here all the time. High ranking uniformed officers and plain clothes. They use the girls. Some of them are violent. Very violent.’

‘I’ll think of something,’ said Sylvian. ‘I know many people. But first things first. Let’s free up the other houses and then go and exterminate the family.’

Emily smiled. ‘Thank you, Sylvian.’

The *Duc* bowed extravagantly. ‘My pleasure, Shadowhunter.’

‘Stay here,’ said Emily to the girls. ‘We’ll send help. Soon.’

Then they left the room and went downstairs to join Tag, Muller and Otto. Sylvian brought them up to speed on their plans.

‘We’re in,’ said Muller. ‘It would be a sin not to put a stop to this. Also, I will phone the local church. They will take care of the girls without involving the police.’

Sylvian nodded. ‘Thank you.’

Muller took out his cell and started dialing.

‘What about this?’ Asked Otto, pointing at Alfred who lay cowering on the ground.

The thug smiled ingratiatingly at Emily. ‘I have answered your questions,’ he said. ‘We had a deal.’

Emily sneered at him. ‘We had no deal, you disgusting slave trader.’ She looked up at Otto. ‘Kill him.’

Alfred threw his hands up. ‘No. Please.’

Otto shot him twice in the chest.

‘Right,’ said Muller. ‘Taken care of. The local parish will mobilize enough people to help. They will rendezvous here and then I will contact them as we clear each house.’

‘Let’s go,’ said Troy.

‘First check the bodies and the cars for grenades,’ said Tag. ‘We’re out. Don’t need any ammo, we still got tons. Also keep an eye out for anything of interest.’

‘Good call,’ agreed Otto.

The group did a quick search of cars and bodies coming up with a dozen grenades. Much to Tag’s delight, Troy found an RPG-7 hand held rocket launcher with two rockets.

‘I call dibs,’ he claimed, holding his hands out. Troy grinned and gave the big man the weapon. Tag strapped it to his back and clipped the two high explosive rockets to his webbing.

Then they walked back to the bus and got in as Muller brought up directions on his cell phone. They headed to the salting house that was closest.

It was less than twenty minutes away and as they drove Sylvian

came up with a plan of sorts.

'Right,' he said. We drive up to the front door. Tag, Emily, Troy and myself go in, we kill all the guards, do a quick check on the girls, Muller calls the church and we move on.'

'What about us?' Asked Otto.

'You wait at the entrance,' answered Sylvian. 'Anyone tries to escape, blast them.'

'Why can't we go in?'

'Because if any of us get shot we can recover before we get to the next house,' said the Bloodborn. 'You guys take longer to heal.'

Otto nodded. 'Fair enough,' he agreed.

Muller pulled up outside the building. 'We're here,' he stated. 'Please all dispatch in an orderly fashion and thank you for traveling with Catholic Knight Transport.'

Troy laughed as they alighted. Emily carried a Heckler and Koch MP5, Tag had his two custom 50 cal machine pistols and Sylvian sported an MP5 and a pistol. Troy had taken off his shirt and he changed as he left the bus, assuming his Wolfman mode.

And then they simply walked up to the building and opened the door. A large man in a cheap suit and carrying an AK47 put his hand up to halt them but Troy grabbed his arm and swung him against the wall so hard that the sound of his breaking bones was obvious even from outside the building.

Then it was a simple house clearing exercise. Tag took the ground floor and the three supernatural's cleared the rest of the building, moving at speeds that were incomprehensible to the guards.

Within minutes the place was clear. Six guards. Six bodies. Some full of gunshot holes, some with their throats torn out and some simply smashed up beyond repair.

Troy morphed back into human mode and called Muller and Otto. Then they split up and quickly checked on the girls, telling them that they were safe and ensuring them that help was coming soon. Some understood but many were too drugged to understand what was going on.

Muller made his calls and then they proceeded onwards.

The next two houses were almost carbon copy situations. Slave traders resisted. Slave traders died. Tag took a bullet to the shoulder in the third house but by the time they had all got back into the bus he had already healed up.

The final house had obviously been warned and they were waiting for them.

Muller stopped the bus outside the house and Tag jumped out first.

There was an explosion of automatic gunfire and the big man went down in a welter of blood as he was riddled with bullets.

Muller immediately jammed the bus into reverse and pulled out of the line of fire, spinning the wheel and careening backwards around the corner.

As soon as the bus had cleared the firing zone, Em, Troy and Sylvian leapt out, weapons hot, Troy turning as he jumped. Both Muller and Otto followed.

'Stay here,' shouted Sylvian.

'No ways,' returned Muller. 'They're ready for us, you're going to need all the firepower that we can muster. We're coming with.'

'Fine, watch yourselves,' agreed the Bloodborn.

Together they ran to the corner. Troy took point and, instead of peering around and checking out the lay of the land, he simply used his unbelievable speed to run to the front of the building and crouch down out of sight. Both Em and Sylvian followed. Then Muller and Otto dropped prone and crept around the corner, firing as they did to keep enemy heads down.

They were about to consolidate and formulate some sort of plan when Tag staggered to his feet, ripped the RPG-7 off his back, rammed a rocket in and fired at the front door.

The high explosive round struck the door, barreled through into the reception area and exploded. A ball of fire billowed out of the front of the house, blowing out the windows and throwing two of the thugs into the street.

Tag sprinted into the building, guns blazing and shouting at the top of his voice.

The rest of the team had no choice but to follow.

The fight was over in minutes.

Tag, Emily and Sylvian split up to reassure the captive girls and Muller, Otto and Troy stayed downstairs and made judicious use of the fire extinguishers to put out the blaze that Tag had started.

Muller made another phone call and they left.

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Chapter 27

The three super-luxury Sandford coaches pulled up opposite the salting house. Their windows were tinted midnight black and it was impossible to see inside.

The door to the leading coach opened and a man stepped out and into the street. He looked around and then signaled to the rest of the occupants.

Doors opened. Men stepped out. All dressed in a uniform. Scarlet and black. Long hair. Pale skin. No visible weapons.

'So this is where they were seen?' Asked Nathan.

Petrus nodded. 'This is the house that they attacked, my lord.'

'And who are these people?' Asked Nathan, pointing at two cars that had obviously just pulled up, there engines no longer running but heat waves still rising from their engines, visible in the sub-zero temperatures.

Petrus looked closely at the two motor vehicles. 'That one has a church parking permit on it,' he noted. 'Probably church officials of some sort.'

'Strange,' said Nathan. 'I wonder what they're doing here. Also, why did Emily attack this place? Let's take a look inside. Ask a few questions. How long until sunrise?'

Petrus glanced at his wristwatch. 'Two hours and twelve minutes, my lord.'

Nathan nodded and then gestured for the Bloodwraiths to follow him into the building.

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Chapter 28

‘It’s a fortress,’ said Troy.

‘No,’ denied Muller. ‘It’s just a house with high walls, electric fencing, guards, dogs, machine guns and claymore mines.’

‘Like I said,’ repeated Troy. ‘A fortress.’

‘We only have two hours until sunrise,’ noted Sylvian. ‘Then Em and I are out of the picture so we need to move fast. I recommend that we split our attack. Muller, you Otto and Tag go in through the front gate. Use the RPG to blow it open and then go in noisy. Use the bus, crash into the front of the house. Do whatever you can to attract their attention and then kill as many as you can. Meanwhile, Troy, Em and I will jump the wall, neutralize the dogs and hit them from behind.’

‘Good plan,’ agreed Tag.

‘The gangster that we questioned said that there would be lots of dogs. A huge pack. Is that going to be a problem?’ Asked Otto.

Sylvian grinned. ‘Trust me, the dogs are no problem. With Em and Troy they are going to be running away so fast that they will literally kill their owners if they get in the way. Right, let’s go.’

Sylvian, Troy and Em alighted from the bus and ran around the corner and up to the wall, moving at their standard supernatural speed, mere blurs of movement in the snow and dark.

Muller revved the bus’ engine and lined up with the front gate. ‘Right, Tag,’ he said. ‘Blow that thing away.’

Tag slotted a rocket into the launcher, leaned out of the bus door and fired. The High Explosive round struck the guardhouse that was attached to the side of the gate and exploded in a massive ball of fire, smashing the guardhouse and its occupants into rubble and tearing the gate from its hinges and throwing it to the ground.

Muller dropped his foot and the bus thumped over the debris and accelerated down the long gravel driveway towards the house.

Tag had dropped the empty RPG and now had a Heckler Koch MP5 in his hand as he leant out of the door firing short bursts at the house, shattering windows and blowing out lights.

Otto joined him, firing one handed, spraying the house with armor piecing rounds from his MP7.

‘Brace yourselves,’ shouted Muller.

The two big men jumped back into the bus and dropped into a seat as the bus climbed the front steps of the house and barreled into the

huge double front doors, smashing them inwards as the bus entered the building.

'Let's go get them,' yelled Tag as he jumped from the bus, firing at anything that he saw moving.

At the same time Troy, Em and Sylvian had crossed the open lawn and had just run into the dogs.

'Wow,' said Emily. 'When he said a lot of dogs he wasn't exaggerating.

A pack of over thirty pure bred Rottweiler stood in front of them. Standing with them were their two handlers.

Troy, who had not yet turned, morphed into his full animal mode. A Wolf the size of a horse.

Both of the handlers simply turned and ran but the dogs, instead of joining them, all dropped to the floor, some rolling over on their backs to show their submission.

Troy stalked amongst them, growling softly, nudging some of them as he passed, nipping others. Then he turned to Em and Sylvain and gestured with a flick of his head for them to follow him.

They ran and the dogs ran with them, servants to the ultimate Alpha. Slaves to his authority.

'Well this is something that you don't see every day,' said Em as they ran, surrounded by a bodyguard of over thirty snarling, slavering attack dogs.

'Should narrow the odds a little,' admitted Sylvian. 'Surprised that they aren't too terrified of you to stay. Very puzzling.'

'I'm doing the blue thing,' said Emily. 'Well, I'm trying to. As soon as it looked as though Troy had things under control I tried to think blue like you showed me. I'm not getting it one hundred percent correct but enough to not scare the canines half to death.

'Well done,' said Sylvian as they reached the back door to the house.

Troy simply hammered through the door without bothering to open it and he ran into the building surrounded by the pack. Em and Sylvian followed.

Gun shots rang out as guards attempted to repel the attack. Two of the dogs went down before the rest of the pack tore the guards apart.

'You take the ground floor,' shouted Sylvian to Troy. 'Em and I will go up.'

The Bloodborn and the Shadowhunter sprinted up the sweeping staircase and headed to the next floor. Both carried MP5 submachine guns.

As they entered the corridor they were greeted by a fusillade of shots and they returned fire. Bodies fell. Blood flowed. Sylvian took the right side of the corridor and Emily the left, kicking doors open and shooting whoever was in the rooms.

Within minutes they had cleared the area and went up the stairs to the top floor of the house. Below them they could hear the battle stuttering to a halt. The gunfire sporadic, interrupted every now and then by a cacophony of barking and growling and the terrified scream of some guard being torn to shreds by the pack.

The top floor of the house was a single large room. The walls lined with books. Original art on various easels were scattered about the room. Persian carpets on the floor. A fire crackled merrily in a large open fireplace.

In the middle, a huge antique desk. Seated behind it a man of indeterminate age somewhere between fifty and seventy. Hair graying at the temples. Clean shaven. Expensive suit. Manicured nails. Skin glossy, stretched. Obviously surgically tightened.

Behind him stood four bodyguards. They all held M126A4 assault rifles.

The man looked like a successful banker. Not a low-life trader in human misery. Almost presidential.

He smiled. 'Well,' he said. 'It looks like what we have here is a Mexican Standoff. Mutually assured destruction.'

'Why would you say that?' Asked Sylvian.

'Isn't it obvious?' Asked the man. 'If you shoot me, my men will open fire on you. So you might kill me but they will definitely kill you. We find ourselves at an impasse.'

Emily smiled. Or to more succinct, she pulled her lips back to show her fangs. 'No,' she disagreed. 'That's not how this is going down.'

Both she and the Bloodborn moved together. Sylvian went right and Emily jumped high in the air, clearing the desk and extending her talons as she did. With a wet tearing sound she ripped out two of the bodyguards' throats before she even touched the ground. Swiveling hard right she dispatched another, breaking his neck with one swift open handed blow.

Sylvian had already killed the fourth guard by smashing his head against the wall.

'There,' she said. 'No impasse. Problem solved.'

She walked around to the front of the desk and stared at the leader of the Foldessy Family. His suave demeanor had turned to obvious bare faced fear. Emily could hear his heart thumping against his ribs, she could smell his fear. Almost taste his blood as it pumped around his body.

And she let out a moan of desire. Of need. The need to feed.

'Go ahead,' said Sylvian. 'No one would blame you. And he is less than an animal. He doesn't deserve to live.'

Emily leaned forward and grabbed the man by his face, dragging him across the desk. Exposing his neck to her fangs. His jugular stood

out like a worm beneath his skin. Pulsing with life.

Emily dropped him. 'No,' she said. 'I know that it's unfair on Tag but I haven't yet taken a human life to feed and I will not do so. Even someone who might deserve it. I am Shadowhunter…not Vampire.'

'Vampire?' gasped the man as he shrank back in fear. 'Please,' he begged. 'Don't hurt me. I have friends, connections. Girls. Many girls, they are young, healthy. I can give them to you. Feed on them. They will be your personal slaves. A lifetime supply. Give me a chance to serve you. Please.'

There was a growl at the door and Troy/Wolf padded in, filling the room. Then he slowly morphed into his Wolfman mode in order to ease his communication abilities. 'Who is this?' He growled.

'Head honcho,' said Emily. 'He's just promised me my own bevy of personal slaves if I don't hurt him.'

Troy walked closer and the man behind the desk whimpered in terror as yet another mythical beast of the night became reality in front of him. 'What is your name?' Asked Troy, his words choppy and guttural. Unsuited to his Wolfish jaw.

'Janos Foldessy,' the man whispered. 'Head of the family.'

'Well, Janos,' said Troy. 'I wouldn't want to be in your shoes. Not for a million dollars. You see, you have offended Emily with your slave trading and she has decided to make you pay.' The Wolfman shook his head. 'Not for a million dollars,' he repeated.

The sound of footsteps caused all to turn towards the door. Tag, Muller and Otto walked in. Tag was covered in blood and his shirt was full of holes.

'Wassup?' He asked. 'And who's this asshole.'

'The head of the Foldessy Family,' answered Em. 'Chief slave trader and violator of young girls. I'm just trying to think of a suitable way to punish him for his transgressions.'

Muller stepped forward. 'I have just the right punishment for such an evil man,' he said as he pulled a flask from his jacket pocket.

'What is that?' Asked Sylvian.

'Holy Water,' answered the Knight of the church.

'Umm…I don't mean to cast aspersions on your faith,' said Emily. 'But splashing a bit of blessed water on this bastard won't actually do anything.'

'Trust me,' interjected Otto. 'We are Knights of the most holy See. Our faith is our sword. If Muller says that he shall punish him, then he shall feel the wrath of our Lord.'

Emily shrugged. 'Okay, do your worst.'

Muller uncapped the bottle and stood over the head of the Foldessy Family. Murderer, slaver and violator. 'The power of Christ compels me,' he declared as he poured the liquid all over the man's face.

Janos started to scream and did not stop until he drew his last breath some twenty minutes later.

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Chapter 29

Blood painted the walls of the room like some insane Jackson Pollock painting.

Nicoleta sat on the chair, frozen in absolute terror. Her roommate lay on the floor in front of her, throat torn open, limbs splayed, dress ripped.

More of the girls lay behind her, piled high like so much firewood. Discarded after those things had fed on them. In fact, some of them were still feeding, grunting and sucking as they drained the life's blood from the broken bodies.

And a man stood in front of her. His face was covered in congealing blood. As was his bare chest.

He smiled. 'My, aren't you a pretty one,' he said, his eyes two black orbs of soulless nothing surrounded by fire red orbs. He approached her and held his hand out to stroke her face but she pulled away in loathing and fear.

'Oh, that won't do,' he said as he grabbed her face with both hands and forced her to look into his demon-like eyes.

And then she felt her free will tear from her as the unbelievable strength of his mind scoured all fear and hatred and loathing from her, leaving only a white hot desire to please him. To worship him. To do his every will and whim.

Then the man stood up, stretched and turned to the priest who lay on the floor, bound by his hands and feet.

'So, priest,' said the man. 'Tell me, what were you and your associates doing here?'

'We had come to help the girls,' replied the holy man, his voice blurred as he spoke through his ruined mouth and broken teeth.

'Why?' Continued Nathan. 'Who killed the guards? Who told you to come here?'

'The diocesan bishop,' answered the priest. 'He said that I must take some of my most trusted parishioners and come to this address. He said to clean up and bring the girls back to the church were they would be safe.'

Nathan laughed. 'Well that didn't work out too well for you, did it?'

The priest started at the Vampire, his eyes full of hatred. 'You will not get away with this,' he said, his voice full of faith. 'The *sedes sacorum* will hunt you down and dispatch you to hell.'

Nathan laughed again. ‘Oh, priest,’ he said. ‘There is no *sedes sacorum* anymore. As you well know, the new Pope has declared that Vampires do not exist. The Knights of the Holy See have been disbanded. So I very much doubt that they will be hunting anyone down.’

Tears of frustration sprang unbidden to the priest’s eyes as he took in the truth of Nathan’s statement and his shoulders dropped with resignation. ‘You shall still rot in hell, you abomination,’ he replied.

‘Perhaps,’ admitted Nathan. ‘But as I am immortal I very much doubt that will happen in the foreseeable future. Now, tell me, priest, who attacked the guards and why?’

The priest looked at Nathan and smiled.

Pater noster, qui es in cœlis;
sanctificatur nomen tuum:
Adveniat regnum tuum;
fiat voluntas tua,

‘No,’ shouted Nathan. ‘I didn’t ask for the Lord’s Prayer, I asked for an answer.

sicut in cœlo, et in terra.
Panem nostrum cotidianum da nobis hodie:
Et dimitte nobis debita nostra,

Nathan strode over to the priest and lifted him off the floor, backhanding him across the face as he did so. ‘Answer me.’

The priest smiled again and continued to pray.

sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris:
et ne nos inducas in tentationem:
sed libera nos a malo.

Nathan struck him again and again but the priest would not stop, even when his face was a bleeding mash of broken flesh.

‘Answer me.’ Screamed Nathan as he punched the holy man again.

The priest managed one last smile.

Quia tuum est regnum, et potestas, et Gloria,
in saecula. Amen.

And then his body went limp as his soul departed.

Nathan threw him against the wall like a discarded chew-toy.

‘I know why they came, my lord,’ said Nicoleta, her face shining with glamoured joy at the fact that she might know something that would please her master.

‘Speak,’ commanded Nathan.

‘The girl, Emily, she came by herself. One of the men kidnapped her and brought her here. Then she killed them all and when the rest of the guards came, her friends arrived and exterminated them.’

The ex-Shadowhunter raised an eyebrow. ‘If they truly did kidnap her them she must have allowed them to,’ he said. ‘I wonder why?’

‘She wanted to help us,’ answered Nicoleta. ‘Even now she and her friends are clearing the other salting houses and freeing the girls. At first her friends did not want to help her. Particularly the French man. He insisted that they were Vampire hunters, not law-makers.’

‘So, merely an unfortunate coincidence for the Foldessy Family.’ He laughed out loud. ‘Damn they must have gotten a shock when the bitch went off at them. And now they’re busy taking down the rest of the family.’

‘They almost didn’t,’ said Nicoleta. ‘The Frenchman insisted that they should rather be seeking something he called the *Protestarium*. ‘He said that they knew where it was.’

Nathan froze. ‘The *Potestatum*?’

Nicoleta nodded. ‘That’s it. The *Potestatum*.’

‘Petrus,’ shouted Nathan.

The Bloodwraith appeared in the room as if by magik, so fast had he moved. ‘My lord?’

‘Gather the brethren. The Shadowhunter has a lead to the *Potestatum*. We must find them and let them take us to it. Move.’

The *Nosferatu* gathered together and boarded their coaches. Nathan kept Nicoleta by his side. A new servant. A slave. A ready meal.

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Chapter 30

Otto and Tag had managed to find an alternative mode of transport given that the bus had been totaled during the attack on the Foldessy stronghold. And no one was complaining about the change.

They now traveled in a custom made eight seat minibus. From the outside the bus looked similar to any standard midrange people mover. But the inside was a very different story.

The seats had been taken from a first class airplane and the rest of the interior was done up like an executive jet, complete with wet bar, on board entertainment and a small washroom. Needless to say, all of the windows were heavily tinted as the Foldessy's liked their privacy, so the sun did not affect Sylvian or Emily as they drove through the day.

'Cluj is different to the other hidden cities,' said Sylvian. 'It is the original one and it has been in existence since time immemorial.'

'Different in what way?' Asked Troy.

'Sylvian thought for a while before he answered. 'No cats,' he said. 'But that isn't the biggest difference. It's difficult to explain without actually experiencing it. I suppose that the best way is to say that hidden Cluj and Cluj proper are the same place, occupying the same space but on a slightly different plane.'

'Well that explains it,' said Tag. 'Apart from all of those words that you just said that mean absolutely nothing to me.'

The Bloodborn sighed. 'You know how we physically entered Pareen and Romeen? Stairs, doorways that sort of thing?'

They all nodded.

'Well that's not how you enter Cluj. The way to enter the hidden part of Cluj is to head for the Botanical gardens, you enter and then, if the city accepts you, you will find yourself walking in the same area but it will be the hidden side of it. In other words, hidden Cluj is the same as normal Cluj but somehow it has been shifted slightly in both time and space. Don't ask me how or when. I don't know.'

'So what you're saying,' said Troy. 'Is that anyone who wants to get into hidden Cluj simply desires it and is let in?'

'No, the city decides. In fact I doubt that Muller or Otto will be allowed in. I haven't seen humans there before. It doesn't actually seem to be a rule, as such, but it never happens. Tag is a gray area,

not sure how human he still is.'

'What about Vampires?' Asked Emily.

'That's the next major difference. Vampires and WereWolves, although not specifically welcomed, are often allowed in. You see, Cluj is a neutral zone. No one has fought there for many millennia and no one ever would. It is taboo.'

'We should be near the city center in under an hour. It's twilight now so night will have fallen.' informed Muller. 'All will become clearer then I am sure. Do the Gardens stay open at night?

'Twenty four hours,' affirmed Sylvian.

'Should we tool up?' Asked Tag.

Sylvian nodded. 'Concealed weapons only. Obviously we can't go walking around the capital city with assault rifles and flak jackets.'

When they entered the city, Sylvian gave Muller directions to the Botanical Garden. They pulled into a parking within sight of the entrance. Sylvian climbed out and took a look at the parking meter. 'Hey.' He called. 'Has anyone got any Romanian Leu? I assumed that they would take Euro but they don't'

'Sure,' quipped Tag. 'Always carry a bunch of Leu around with me. Obscure currency is my bag.'

'I take it that means no,' noted Sylvian.

'So what?' Asked Troy. 'Let them fine us. Not as if it's our vehicle and the Foldessy Family is way past caring.'

The Bloodborn chuckled. 'True,' he admitted. 'So, follow me. Let's see how many of us can get into hidden Cluj.'

The team strolled into the Botanic Garden heading towards the center. 'Right then,' said Sylvian. 'This is a little hard to explain but I want you all to visualize being in the hidden Cluj.'

'How?' Asked Tag. 'We never been there so we don't know what to visualize.'

'It doesn't actually matter,' replied Sylvian. 'Just think of the idea.'

Tag shrugged and his eyes narrowed as he tried to think of the idea of a place that he had never been to. The others assumed similar expressions of baffled concentration.

'Now close your eyes,' instructed the Bloodborn.

They all did so.

'That's strange,' continued Sylvian. 'I would never have thought that Muller and Otto would be accepted.'

The group opened their eyes to find themselves in the same Botanic Garden. Apart from two major differences. Firstly they were surrounded by a throng of mythical creatures. Elves, trolls, goblins and more. Secondly, the light was totally different. Instead of the distant pale blue moon that they had left the celestial orb that hung above them now was huge and golden-red. Its light bathed all in an

Aurelian glow, tinted with flecks of scarlet. The world as viewed through a beautiful stained glass window.

'It's stunning,' gasped Emily.

'Amazing,' agreed Troy.

Both Muller and Otto crossed themselves.

'Why's it all so orange?' Asked Tag. 'Looks weird.'

Troy laughed. 'And once again,' he said. 'Tag is smitten by the awesome beauty of the unknown.'

'What?' Said Tag. 'All I said is that the place comes over a little on the tangerine side. That's all.'

'Where too now?' Asked Emily.

'Things are a little more open here than the other hidden cities,' said Sylvian. 'I suggest that we go to the library and simply ask where the WereWolves live. The librarians here are famous for their knowledge of all matters both arcane and mundane.'

It took them twenty minutes to walk to the library. An impressive yellow stone building with a sweeping stairway in the front. Sylvian led them inside and approached a severe looking older woman seated at the front desk.

The Frenchman bowed extravagantly before he spoke. 'It has been too long, my Aphrodite of the halls of learning,' he said in greeting to the sour looking old lady.

She snorted. 'It's never long enough, you reprobate. What are you here for today? Spreading rumor and causing trouble as usual?"

Sylvian took her hand and kissed it. 'How are you, my love?'

'Alive. Still learning. There is so much to read. So very much to catalog.'

'The quest for knowledge is never-ending,' agreed the Bloodborn.'

'What do you want?' The lady replied abruptly.

'Advice,' said Sylvian. 'Nothing too onerous. In fact I hesitate to ask you something so mundane. My colleagues and I seek a friend. A certain, Methuselah.'

'The oldest of all WereWolves. The Wolf whose death shall bring judgment?'

'The self same one,' concurred Sylvian.

She shook her head. 'No. Never heard of him.'

'Oh foul and monstrous untruth,' said Sylvian with a chuckle in his voice. But please put your mind at ease, my dear heart. We come in peace. In fact we have been sent by Methuselah's ultimate master, the Omega himself.'

The old lady thought for a few seconds and then shook her head again. 'No. If he sent you then he would have told you where to look.'

'He couldn't,' argued Sylvian. 'It's complicated but, essentially, we speak the truth.'

‘Essentially is not ultimately. The essence of what you say may be truthful but that simply means that all of the extraneous parts could be a lie.’

Troy stepped forward. ‘Ma’am, if I may approach?’

The old lady nodded. ‘How can I refuse one with such manners?’

‘Easy,’ mumbled Sylvian. ‘You just refused me.’

Troy held out the signet ring. ‘This is Sir William’s ring. He gave it to me so that I can talk in his stead. We are on a mission of the utmost importance and the absolute acme of secrecy. I beg of you, please tell us where my brother Wolf is. I assure you, on the Pack, that we mean him no harm, we merely seek his guidance.’

She beckoned to Troy to step forward and she took his hand. The Wolf gasped as he felt his entire life open to the old lady. His every thought, his every breath. The very essence of his knowledge.

‘You lie,’ she said. ‘But you mean no harm by it. Next time tell the whole truth, my child, it will get you further. As it happens, your arrival has been preordained.’ She turned to look at Emily. ‘As was hers, the Shadowhunter.’ She let go of the Wolfman’s hand. ‘Go to the fountains. From there you will know where to proceed to.’

Troy bowed his thanks as did Sylvian.

‘Girl,’ she said to Emily. ‘Be careful. Power is a terrible thing. Never let it control you.’

And then she turned her back on them.

Sylvian gestured to the group and they followed him from the library and out into the golden night.

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Chapter 31

‘Many parts of the hidden city are the same as the visible one,’ said Sylvian. ‘Particularly the older buildings. But this fountain is unique. Fed from underground springs that do not exist in the other world. It is said that once you have drunk from them you will always feel a compulsion to return.’

‘Is that true?’ Asked Muller.

‘I don’t know,’ admitted Sylvian. ‘I have never drunk from the fountain.’

‘Tell me,’ continued Muller. ‘Why are we here? I mean Otto and me. How come the city let us in, being human and all?’

‘Another question that I do not know the answer to,’ said the Bloodborn. ‘Either the city now accepts humans or, more likely, when you take your vow as a Knight of the Church you somehow become less human. More saintly. Ethereal in some way.’

‘Perhaps,’ agreed Muller. ‘So now what? The lady at the library said that when we get here we shall know what to do next.’

‘And that is the third unanswerable question in a row,’ said Sylvian. ‘If you are looking to fill me with feelings of inadequacy then you are doing well, my friend.’

‘We go there,’ said Emily, pointing at a nondescript door in one of the buildings.

‘Why?’ Asked Troy.

‘I can feel him,’ answered Em. ‘Just like I can feel the rest of the Pack. The only difference is that I am sure that he is allowing me to feel him. It was like he opened up to me. A sense of age. Wisdom. Power. And sadness.’

‘Lead the way,’ said Troy.

The group proceeded to the door. Emily was about to knock when it opened slowly, revealing a single room. Dimly lit by a single oil lamp. Rustic, large chairs and a single ancient Oak table. A fire crackled in an open fireplace. Standing in the middle of the room was a man.

He wore a long cloak and his gray hair hung to his waist, as did his beard. He stood tall but slightly hunched, as if he were carrying a heavy weight on his shoulders. He was massive. Taller than both Tag and Otto and wider than both put together. But when you looked at him it was almost impossible to stop staring at his eyes. Golden orbs that seemed to pulse with an inner light. They literally bathed the

room in a subtle gilded wash. A living light.

Troy bowed deeply. 'Methuselah,' he greeted the huge man.

'My son. You have arrived as foretold.' He rest his massive hand on Troy's head. A greeting. Or perhaps a benediction of some sort. Then he turned to the rest of the group and greeted them in turn. 'Emily the Shadowhunter, well met. Sylvian the Bloodborn *Duc*. Otto, the blasphemer. Muller, the pious. And Tag,' he smiled and nodded. 'Tag the brave.'

His voice rumbled like distant thunder, so deep as to be felt physically like a minor earth tremor.

'Foretold by whom?' Asked Troy.

Methuselah laughed, a vibrant rolling chuckle. 'By me of course, young Wolf. Now pray all sit,' he gestured towards the chairs surrounding the table. They followed his instructions.

From beneath his cloak he drew out a small intricately carved wooden box. Not much bigger than a matchbox. He placed it on the center of the table as he sat down. Then he pulled out a Meerschaum pipe and proceeded to chew on the stem without lighting it.

No one said anything as they respectfully waited for the ancient Werewolf to speak.

'We do not have much time,' he said eventually. 'In the box resides that which you seek.'

'The *Potestatum*?' Asked Sylvian.

'The very thing,' confirmed Methuselah. 'I am its ultimate guardian. As such I am not allowed to pass it on to anyone unless judgment time is upon us.'

'We could take it,' said Muller.

The gigantic old man shook his head. 'No, Muller the pious. You might attempt to take it but even though thy companions and thyself art mighty beyond measure you are no match for me. Not even close.'

He stood up. It was like watching a tree grow in super fast motion. A force of nature. 'Then he picked up the box and handed it to Troy. 'I, Methuselah, the oldest of the Pack, also known as The Wolf of the Spear and The Wolf whose death shall bring judgment, hand this item of power over to you, Troy, Alpha to be. Do with it as you deem prudent.'

Troy stood to accept the box. 'But, master,' he said. 'Does that not mean that judgment time is upon us?'

The old Wolf nodded. 'My judgment, young Wolf. Not yours. They are almost here. Many, many Vampires. They followed you into the city and the city saw fit to allow them in. Leave via the back door. Travel straight until you come to a large green building. Enter. Seek the stairs to the basement. They will take you to a room that will transport you back to your world. Do it now, the enemy is almost

upon us. I will stall them for as long as I can.'

'We will stay with you,' said Sylvian. 'Together we can defeat any quantity of Vampires.'

Methuselah shook his head. 'No. Not this many. And these are different. Well trained. Strong, fast and vicious beyond belief. Anyway, you are all too important to risk. Humanity will need you all to lead during the coming wars. Now go.'

Emily walked over and kissed the old man, rising up on her tiptoes to reach his cheek. The rest of the men shook hands and headed for the back door.

Except for Otto.

'Come,' said Muller. 'We need to go.'

Otto shook his head. 'I am not a leader,' he said. 'Humanity will not need me in the wars to come but the old man will need all the help that he can get here. Now. So you go. I have made my peace with the Lord. Perhaps I shall be remembered as something beside Otto the Blasphemer.'

Muller shook Otto's hand. 'I will ensure that you are remembered well,' he said.

The old Wolf nodded. 'Your help will be greatly appreciated.'

The team left via the back door.

Methuselah and Otto walked out of the front door and stood. Waiting.

While they did, Methuselah removed his clothes and changed. A slow metamorphosis from old man to frosty haired Wolf. When the change was over he stood over seven feet tall. Larger than a Dray horse. Teeth the size of a man's forearm.

The Vampires appeared around the corner. Over fifty of them, walking fast. In front of them came Nathan.

There were no official challengers. No witty banter or one-liners. The Vampires attacked and Otto and Methuselah fought back.

At first it seemed as though the impossible would happen. Otto's MP7 spat silver coated bullets, smashing into the opposing Bloodwraiths and the old Wolf ripped and tore into them at the same time. Ten bloodsuckers went down in the initial impact.

But many of them rose again, healing as they did and, as powerful as the old Wolf and the Knight were, they were quickly overwhelmed by the wave of evil that engulfed them. Methuselah went down under a pile of over thirty Bloodwraiths as they bit and hammered and tore at him. Sundering him apart as they did. He died surrounded by piles of Vampire corpses, a growl in his throat and a smile on his lips.

Just before one of the Vampires ripped the life from Otto, the Knight pulled out his pistol and put it against his temple. 'You will never change me,' he said. 'See you all in hell.'

He pulled the trigger and a martyr was born.

Otto the Redeemer.

***

Nathan led the charge into Methuselah's house as he and the Bloodwraiths frantically searched for signs of Emily, her friends and the *Potestatum*.

But it was to no avail.

They were no longer there and it would be impossible to track them down with no idea what direction they had been heading.

Gone.

He threw back his head and howled in anger and frustration.

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Chapter 32

‘Perhaps they made it,’ said Sylvian to Muller.

Emily shook her head. ‘Methuselah is gone,’ she said. ‘I felt him leave. And I doubt that Otto would have survived.’ She walked over to Muller and grasped his shoulder. ‘Your friend was a very brave man,’ she said.

‘He was not my friend,’ whispered Muller. ‘I hardly knew him. He was a criminal and a blasphemer.’ The knight took a deep breath. ‘I shall miss him very much.’ He twitched the curtain aside and peered out. The sun had risen and the city sparkled under its coat of pristine snow. A veritable winter wonderland. Or perhaps a shroud. Death robes for a man who was more than a friend. A comrade. Otto the Redeemer.

Troy sat at the table in the suite of rooms that Sylvian had booked them into when they had arrived back in the actual city of Cluj. The entire top floor of the renowned five star Grand Hotel. On the center of the table was the wooden box containing the *Potestatum*.

Emily came and sat opposite the young Wolf. Troy looked up and then pushed the box across the table to her. ‘Open it,’ he said. ‘It is yours.’

‘Are you sure?’

Troy nodded. ‘We searched for it to give to you. Nothing has changed. We all believe in you. In your goodness. Take it.’

The rest of the men gathered around, watching.

Emily opened the box.

Inside, nestled in the red velvet lining, was a small shard of steel. An inch long and perhaps quarter of an inch wide.

Sylvian gasped. ‘It is a piece of the sword,’ he said, his voice hoarse with reverence. ‘Excalibur.’

With shaking fingers, Emily took it from the box and laid it in her right hand to inspect.

But as she did there was a blinding flash of light and her whole arm ignited, springing into flame. She screamed in agony and tried to drop the artifact but it stuck to her skin, burning its way into her flesh.

Then all went dark.

Seconds, or minutes or maybe a lifetime later, the group regained their senses. Rising out of the blackness like a leviathan coming up from the deep.

Emily stood by the window. Her flesh was whole. Her clothing

untouched.

Troy rushed over to her and grasped her arm to check her burns. Branded into the palm of her right hand was a perfect, red pentagram. And on the back of her hand the crossed Z of the Wolf rune and the triangular Vampire rune. On her wrist and wrapping around her forearm was the final brand. The inverted horseshoe shape of the Omega.

Then she stepped forward and pulled the curtains open. Sunlight flooded into the room causing Sylvian to run to the far end, away from its damaging rays.

But Emily stood and basked in the sunlight, welcoming its life affirming force.

She turned to the room, a smile on her face, her fangs still visible to all. 'I'm starving,' she said.

She looked at Tag whose face fell as he stood up, ready to feed his ward once again.

'Thank you, Big Man,' she said. 'I would kill for a Mac and Cheese. Supersized.'

Then she embraced the man whose bravery had kept her alive. Had saved her humanity.

And had helped to make her…

The Daywalker!

****

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Emily Shadowhunter - Book 4 - Day Walker

Now I can never show my face at noon
And you'll only see me walking by the light of the moon
The brim of my hat hides the eye of a beast
I've the face of a sinner but the hands of a priest

Sting – Moon over Bourbon street.

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Chapter 1 – Book 4: DAYWALKER

Emily had been gone for almost a month. But William had not been that worried about her until now. After all, she had been with Tag, Sylvian and Troy. And even without them she could take care of herself.

Besides that, like the rest of the Pack, William could feel her existence. On the very periphery of his consciousness. Constantly aware of her presence. Her life force.

Until yesterday.

As he had lost contact, the Pack started to howl and, mere seconds later, the two Alphas were at his door.

They had simply stared at him, saying nothing. It was left to him as Omega to acknowledge the fact.

'She is gone,' he admitted. And he felt his heart tear from his breast as he uttered the words.

Emily Shadowhunter was no more.

The Pack gathered in front of the house, changing as they did. Howling their grief. Barking and growling. Snapping at each other in their anguish and frustration.

Feeding off the misery of the Omega.

Then they had run. Moving together through the surrounding forest. Not hunting, merely running.

Pack.

Affirming their life force.

Acknowledging their loss.

That evening they had stayed in their wolf forms. As they had onto this next morning. Sleeping in the open. At one with the outdoors. Allowing the wind and rain to help cleanse the loss from their souls.

Together.

Pack.

Strangely William was not the first to hear the vehicle approaching, such was his grief. One of the female wolves scrambled to her feet, head cocked to one side. As the Landrover grew closer more of the wolves shook themselves out of their reverie and stood, their lupine forms dark and indistinct as the sun had not quite yet risen.

The vehicle crunched up the driveway and stopped in front of the Pack.

The doors opened.

Troy stepped out followed by Sylvian, Tag and a stranger.

And finally, Emily.

Almost as one the Pack threw their heads back and howled. But it was not a sound of joy. Instead it was a cry of relief. A visceral release of pain and loss.

Such was the collective volume that the very trees shook in sympathy and as far as the eye could see, birds flocked to the skies in an explosion of wings and feathers.

Tears came to Emily's eyes as she walked amongst the Pack, touching them softly as she did so. An almost religious benediction. A physical affirmation of her return.

Then the sun rose above the horizon, a huge red ball of light. And the rays bathed Emily in scarlet and yellow and silver.

And the Pack knew.

She was the Daywalker.

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Chapter 2

‘But you knew we were going,’ argued Troy. ‘The money, the passports, your signet ring.’

William nodded. ‘Technically, perhaps I assisted. Or, more correctly, organized enough help so that your transgressions did not lead to your death. However, the fact remains, you disobeyed a direct order from both your Alpha and your Omega. For that you must be punished. It is the lore of the Pack.’

‘But he did it for me,’ stated Emily. ‘He saved me.’

‘And for that he must be commended,’ agreed William. ‘But his transgressions must be paid for. The *Potestatum* and what it has done to you is a different issue and we shall deal with that at a later stage. First, discipline. It is the Pack way.’

Troy went down on one knee and bowed his head. ‘That discipline I gladly accept,’ he intoned.

There was a low growl of approval from the gathered Pack.

William stood up and faced the wolves. ‘The lore of the Pack states that punishment for disobeying one’s Alpha is straight forward. Trial by combat. As no one has ever disobeyed the Omega before there is no specific aspect of our lore that encapsulates this particular transgression. As Omega I decree that the wolf known as Troy shall face trial by combat against the ten best wolves of the two packs. However, unlike the usual trial he will not face them one at a time but instead will fight the entire ten at once.’

There was a growl of surprise amongst the Pack. But no one argued against the Omega.

No one accepting Emily. The Daywalker.

‘No,’ she shouted. ‘For a single wolf to face ten is a simple death penalty. I will not allow it.’

‘It is not for you to allow or disallow,’ stated William. ‘You are not Pack.’

Emily stood tall and faced the Omega. ‘I am more than Pack. I am the Daywalker and I say that this travesty of justice will not take place. I insist.’

A palpable wave of power rippled out from the young girl and her eyes bored into the Omega Wolf. As one the entire Pack dropped to their knees, heads down, postures submissive.

William stayed standing but the effort to do so sent spasms through

his body. He gritted his teeth as Emily's coercion slammed into him, hammering at his mind in an effort to drive him into submission.

Merlin, who had been standing to the side, watching over the entire procedure, stepped forward and placed himself between Emily and the Omega. His blue eyes crackled with power as he raised his hand. 'Stop,' he commanded. 'What do you think that you are doing?' He asked of Emily.

The girl shook her head. 'I'm simply trying to stop this Pack stupidity,' she answered. 'I'm also a part of this and I want my say.'

'Look around you,' said Merlin as he gestured to the Pack.

Emily turned to face them and raised an eyebrow in surprise. 'Why are they all on their knees?'

'Because of you, my girl,' answered Merlin. 'You coerced them. You crushed their thoughts with your own. Basically, you glamoured them. Now stop it this instant. These are your friends. One doesn't go around brainwashing your friends. It's simply not done.'

Emily's hand flew to her mouth. 'I didn't know,' she whispered. 'I was just talking. Putting my point across. I would never…it's like mind rape.'

Merlin patted her on the shoulder. 'I know that you would never do that on purpose,' he said. 'But it is obviously something that you shall need to watch from now on. And there may very well be many other anomalies that you will have to deal with. I think that you, the Prof and I need to sit down together and attempt to get a handle on it all. Now, enough of this silliness. It is not your place to stand against the Omega. And even if you did I rather suspect that young Troy would not be happy with that, after all, he is Pack and to him, Pack is everything. The strength of the Wolf and all that.'

'But they'll kill him,' urged Emily.

'Pack business,' stressed the Magician. 'Stand back.'

Emily nodded and stepped away, moving to the periphery of the proceedings. As she did so the wolves all rose and once more faced their Omega, some of their expressions a little shamefaced at how easily the Daywalker had forced her will on them.

William said nothing. He merely started to point out the wolves that would take on Troy. As he gestured towards them they stood forward. The fastest, the biggest and the best. Amongst them was the Alpha of Bad Moon M.C. Jack Wishbone as well as Rufus Gray, the ex-Beta, now Alpha of The Protectors M.C.

Silently they stripped down, shedding their clothes, readying for the change.

Troy did the same.

'As always,' said William. 'It is up to the participants to decide whether this fight is to the death or not. However, before you start, I

add one more point for consideration. I deem that, if Troy Wolf wins he is to become the new senior Alpha of the whole Pack. In charge of both Bad Moon and The Protectors.

There was a ripple of surprise amongst the Pack members. Some even let out small whines or low growls of shock.

'I have spoken,' said William. 'Now let the trial begin.'

Troy changed instantly into his Wolf/Man mode, growing to over seven feet in height, jaw extending and limbs bulging with muscle.

His adversaries changed as well, all assuming their usual wolf forms.

But even before they had fully changed, Troy had attacked, smashing three to the floor with mighty overhand blows, breaking their backs and crushing their bones. The wounds were savage and dire but they would survive, albeit they would take a while to recover.

Then the rest were onto him. Fur and flesh and blood flew as the massive animals fought, their jaws as strong as industrial hammermills, limbs as powerful as hydraulic presses. Moving so fast as to appear as if the whole episode had been filmed in stop motion photography and played back at ten times speed.

But as fast as the wolves were, Troy was faster, his Wolf/Man mode more agile, his strength almost exponentially greater than theirs.

He was truly a wolf apart.

And then there was only him, Lucas and Rufus left.

They circled each other, feinting every now and then in an attempt to draw the other into making a mistake. A fatal flaw.

Rufus attacked first. But it was a half-hearted attempt. Almost as if he had already given up and simply wanted the whole thing to come to an end.

Troy clubbed him to the ground without effort and the Alpha lay still, the slight rise and fall of his chest the only sign that he was still alive.

Then Troy attacked the last remaining wolf. Lucas fought back, but it was like trying to fight a force of nature. Troy had eschewed any form of tactics or subtlety and he merely threw himself at the remaining Alpha, claws flashing and teeth clashing as he did so. He bit down on Lucas' shoulder and shook him hard from side to side, flinging him to the ground. Then he picked him up one last time and hammered a massive fist into his jaw, knocking him senseless and dropping him to the floor.

And slowly Troy changed back into his human form, his body covered in blood. Both the Pack's and his own.

'It is done,' he said quietly. 'There shall be no death. And even though it is a position that I did not seek, I declare myself victor and senior Alpha of both Bad Moon and The Protectors.'

'No,' shouted Lucas Caine as he stood up. He too was once more in

his human form. ‘I will not serve under this stripling. This disobedient cub.’

‘I am your Alpha,’ stated Troy. ‘And you will obey me.’

Lucas changed as he leapt forward, his massive teeth bared and jaw opened wide.

Emily screamed in shock because she knew that if Troy didn’t change in time, he would stand no chance against the werewolf that was setting to tear his throat open.

But Troy did not change.

Instead he moved forward, grasping the huge wolf by his throat and using its weight and momentum to smash it into the ground. Then, with claws extended, he struck Lucas Caine in the chest, tearing through the muscle and bone until he reached his beating heart.

And with a savage and primal howl, Troy ripped Lucas’ heart from his body and held it above his head.

Senior Alpha.

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Chapter 3

If Nathan Tremblay was a politician running for office he might well be suffering what would be termed a ‘loss of popularity in the polls’. His abortive attempt to capture Emily Shadowhunter and retrieve the fabled *Corona Potestatum* had resulted not only in a huge waste of time but also absolute failure. He had not gained possession of the *Potestatum* nor Emily, he had lost seven Elder Bloodwraiths in a battle with an old wolf and a large muscle-bound human and he had absolutely no idea where to search next.

Regardless of his personal power, people were starting to talk. Whispers of incompetence were in the air. Not to his face nor even spoken in his vicinity…but the rumors were being circulated.

And Nathan had to find a way to put a stop to it.

After all, his power had already been eroded by the *Capo’s* insistence that he report to the council of elders before he committed any major plan to action, so any further erosion of perceived power could not be tolerated. He needed some sort of coup. A bold plan of action that would show all that he was on his game.

A leader.

Invincible and unstoppable.

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Chapter 4

Emily concentrated, and the axe appeared in her right hand. It was the first time that she had been able to call the weapon forth since she had been bitten. And it felt good. Right.

'Deathwalker,' she murmured.

Then she distinctly heard the axe answer. A sibilant whisper of wind in her mind. Not so much a greeting as an acknowledgment.

'Daywalker.'

Slowly at first and then with increasing speed she went through her forms with the weapon. As no one had actually fought using a double bladed battle axe for over five hundred years, Emily used a variation on her Katana, bo-staff and karate moves, blending them together to meld into a seamless, free flowing form of axe-combat.

The rising sun glittered off the polished blades and the weapon sung softly as it cut through the air, a scarlet web of light and movement, as beautiful as new-spun gossamer and as deadly as a heart attack.

Merlin watched her from the sidelines. His advance had been silent, and he had approached from behind the teenage girl, staying in the shadows and not talking so as not to disturb her.

Emily stopped mid swing and placed the twin spikes of the blades on the ground.

'Morning, Merlin,' she said.

The magician raised an eyebrow. 'You heard me?' He asked.

'No. I simply knew that you were there. I knew before you left the house.'

'How, some sort of prescience?'

Emily laughed. 'No, nothing as esoteric as that. I heard your heartbeat. Could smell your blood.'

'I would have thought that the *Potestatum* stopped that,' noted the magician. 'Along with the need for blood.'

Em shook her head. 'No, it stopped the need to feed on human blood to survive, but it did nothing to effect the want. The desire is still there as strong as ever. But it's controllable. As I said, a want as opposed to a need.'

'What else?' Continued Merlin.

'The sun, obviously,' said Em. 'I can take sunlight.' She pulled her lips back in a fake smile. 'For some reason my fangs are now a permanent fixture, they don't retract. Also,' she lifted the axe. 'I can

conjure up Deathwalker again. Apart from that, pretty much all of my faculties have been enhanced. Some more than others. I'm faster, stronger, have better hearing, sense of smell. My peripheral vision is almost three hundred degrees, eyesight is off the charts both day and night.'

'All good then,' commented the magician. 'Any down sides? What are the cons if any?'

Em took a deep breath. 'Rage. It's like I have a constant fire burning in my belly. A need to lash out. It's real strong. Killing strong. It's only been a few days now but I also find myself looking on others with scorn. Detachment. Everyone seems so feeble. Particularly normal humans, they're pathetic. Soft, breakable, weak. Fortunately I haven't seen many of them but when I have done so I have had to restrain myself from simply hitting them. Crushing them.'

'So the new guy, the Catholic Knight, Sergeant Muller,' asked Merlin. 'You feel that way about him?'

'No. He's different,' admitted Emily. 'Not even sure that he's fully human. Perhaps the Prof should take a look at him, might discover something interesting.'

'I'll tell him,' acknowledged the magician. 'But it sounds as if you have things under control. For now. Any problems do not hesitate to speak to one of us.'

Emily nodded, picked her axe up and continued her forms. Swinging, parrying and cutting at imaginary enemies.

Dealing imaginary death.

Bathing in imaginary blood.

***

Tag stared at the teapot in bemusement. To be more accurate, he stared at the remains of the teapot. It was nothing fancy. A standard, caterers size large stainless steel teapot. He had taken it out of the cupboard to make tea, filled it with water from the kettle and then realized that he had not yet boiled the water.

So, in a fit of childish pique, he had crushed it. Well, he had attempted to crush it knowing that even his prodigious strength would do little more that dent the thick stainless steel.

Instead he had effortlessly compacted the steel kitchenware into a nugget the size of a baseball. In fact, water had squirted out so fast that it had literally become steam.

Being the man that he was, Tag put the nugget in his pocket, walked out of the kitchen, approached the first medium sized tree that he saw and wrapped his arms around the trunk.

And then, with a grunt of effort, he literally tore it from the ground and tossed it over his shoulder. He contemplated the uprooted Oak for

a while and then went back inside to find the Prof.

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Chapter 5

William walked into the room to find Tag sitting on the table, shirt off with a bored expression on his face. The Prof stood over an old fashioned brass microscope, a scalpel on one hand and a ball peen hammer in the other.

'Hey,' said William. 'Rumor has it that you're ripping out my Oak trees like weeds. What gives?'

Tag reached into his trouser pocket, pulled out the solid nugget of steel and threw it to William. The Omega caught it, stared at it and shrugged. 'What's this?'

'Teapot,' answered Tag.

'Could have fooled me. Why's it so…small?'

'I crushed it by mistake this morning,' said Tag. 'I mean, I literally gave it a gentle squeeze and the mother turned onto a lump of solid steel. So I went outside to test my strength on something a little more resistant than a teapot. Pulled a tree out. Came to see the Prof to find out what gives.'

'Well next time, pick up a car or something,' said William. 'That tree was over twenty years old.' He turned to the Prof. 'So, what's going on? Has Tag suddenly developed super-strength?'

The Prof looked up from the microscope. 'In a word…yes,' he confirmed.

Tag punched the air. 'Yes. I'm a friggin superhero. Immortal, super strong, bad ass mother. Think I'll get myself a cool spandex outfit. A cape. Call myself Reggae-man or Extra super-dooper dude.'

'Extra super-dooper dude?' Asked William. 'Really?'

The Prof held his hand up. 'Before we start the celebrations, there are a few things that I need to explain. The whys and wherefores etcetera.'

'Oh oh,' said Tag. 'This doesn't sound good. When the Prof starts with his pros and cons, the cons normally come out ahead. Okay, Prof. What's the bad news?'

'Let's start with the increase in strength,' said the Prof. 'It seems as though Emily has transmitted some sort of virus to you when she fed. In anyone else this would have been fatal. However, in your case, your regenerative powers are constantly replacing your infected blood with fresh red blood cells. As a result your heart rate has increased to around five times what it was. This has caused your muscle density,

adrenalin capacity and so on to increase exponentially. In other words, your body has been turbocharged.'

'Exceptionally cool,' retorted Tag. 'I'm a supercharged mother.'

'Hmm,' grunted the Prof. 'Herein lies the potential bad news. You see, every human heart has the capacity for around two billion beats before it expires. Prior to this infection your heartbeat had dropped to around thirty beats a minute. That had the knock on effect of extending your possible lifespan to two hundred years or so. However, now your heartbeat is up at one hundred and eighty beats a minute. Theoretically, that might shorten your life to another ten years maximum.'

'Bummer,' said Tag. 'But won't my regeneration sort that out?'

The Prof shrugged. 'I honestly do not know,' he answered. 'You are a truly unique living organism. I can but extrapolate on what evidence that I have before me.'

Tag shook his head. 'Don't sweat it, Prof. I heard the words, might, perhaps and potential in that speech. I'll take that as a maybe and choose to ignore it. Who knows, might be I still live to be a hundred and plenty.'

'Perhaps,' admitted the Prof.

'Cool,' said Tag. 'I'm going to tell Emily that I'm a superhuman. Maybe pick up a car or two. Awesome.'

The Prof and William watched the big man leave.

'Sometimes he's like a child,' noted the Prof. 'Lives only in the moment.'

'True,' agreed William. 'But a brave child. He never puts his life above anyone else's. He would defend us all to his last breath. A truly selfless man. I do hope that you are wrong, Prof. It would be nice for the big man to get a break. He deserves it.'

There was the sound of a loud crash outside and William went to the window. He saw Tag standing next to an overturned Landrover, his face a mask of guilt. Next to him stood Emily, and it was obvious from her expression that she was trying her hardest not to laugh.

William didn't bother and his laughter rang out loud and long.

Tag looked up and shook his head. 'Sorry,' he said. 'It slipped.'

***

That night Emily began to get back in contact with the gargoyles, starting with Coldstone Matthew Kent Granite, the first gargoyle that she had met and the *de facto* leader of the rest of them.

'Coldstone,' she thought.

'Greetings Emily Guardian leader, now known as Daywalker.'

'You know?' Asked Emily.

'We know much,' replied Coldstone. 'Although our numbers are

depleted, we still watch from the length and breadth of Europe as well as the United Kingdom.'

'It's been a while,' noted Em.

Coldstone made that odd grating sound that Emily knew was laughter. 'To a human, perhaps,' he admitted. 'But to a gargoyle it was less than a blink of an eye. We have noted vampires but when we called you did not answer.'

'As you apparently knew, I was busy,' said Em. 'But I'm back and it's time to go to work. Send word, I feel the need to hunt.'

'Ready yourselves, Guardian leader,' said Coldstone. 'We shall find prey for you.'

Emily stood up and stretched before she spoke to Troy. 'We need to put the teams back together again,' she said. 'Spread them around the country so that we can go back on the offensive.'

Troy shook his head. 'To soon,' he said. 'We saw what those elite vamps are capable of. They're more than a match for our boys. And if we spread ourselves too thin and they outnumber us, then there is every chance that we will lose. They're too fast, too strong and too well trained to take on without numerical advantage.'

'But you know as well as I that if we bulk the teams up, maybe fifteen or twenty per team, then we simply cannot cover enough ground. We have to get out there, Troy,' insisted Em. 'Every day that we don't, more people die. More of the homeless disappear, more indigents and teenage runaways.'

'I will not put the Pack at risk,' said Troy. 'And if we send out teams of less than twenty, then they are at risk.'

'What does William think about that?' Asked Emily. 'Have you spoken to him?'

The young Alpha shook his head. 'No. But there is no need. I am senior Alpha. It is my Pack. The Omega would not see fit to intervene.'

'Troy,' continued Em. 'We have to get out there. I insist.'

Troy flinched as Emily spoke. 'Em,' he said through gritted teeth. 'Stop that.'

Emily's hand flew to her mouth. 'Oh, shit. I'm sorry, Troy. Genuinely. I didn't mean to coerce you. It just happens.'

'No worries,' gasped the wolf in relief. 'But try to control it. Resisting makes you feel like someone is trying to shuck your brain out of your head with a crowbar.'

Em laid her hand on Troy's cheek. 'Sorry. What do you suggest then?'

'I need to train my lads,' he replied. 'We fight like wolves. A Pack of individuals. Instead we need to learn to fight as one giant being with many teeth and claws. We need to become better. Faster. More deadly than ever before. Nathan has upped the game we need to respond in

kind. I need at least two months before we are ready.'

'What do we do until then?' Asked Em. 'Just let people die?' She shook her head. 'I cannot accept that.'

'If I may intervene,' said Sylvian as he walked into the room. 'I apologize but I couldn't help but overhear your dilemma,' he continued. 'It's one of the curses of having hyper-developed senses. Do you agree that a team consisting of Emily, Troy, Tag, Bastian, Muller and I would be safe against superior odds?' He asked both Em and Troy.

Troy laughed. 'Unless there were in excess of fifty, maybe even a hundred of those super-vamps then, yes, I reckon we could kick proverbial ass. But one team does not a force make. What are the chances that an attack will take place within striking distance of us? I'd say close to zero.'

'I agree,' conceded the Frenchman. 'However, do you remember Latobias?'

'The God dude,' said Em. 'God of flying or something. He took us to France.'

'That's him,' said Sylvian. 'The Celtic god of wind and air.'

'What about him?' Asked Troy.

'He's been in contact with me,' answered the Bloodborn. 'The long and the short of it is that he would like to get involved in the fight. Always has and always will hate vamps. So, I could base him here with a helicopter and with his powers he could get us pretty much anywhere in the country in mere minutes. Remember how he cut the trip to France down from over an hour to less than twenty minutes. And he's capable of doing it even faster if needs be.'

'Now we're talking,' said Em with a grin.

'I'll tell him,' confirmed Sylvian. 'He'll be here within the hour. He'll bring a Eurocopter. Capable of transporting up to eight people.'

'Exceptionally cool,' quipped Troy. 'Go for it.'

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Chapter 6

Troy had appointed Rufus Gray as his Beta and the older wolf had accepted his new post with grace. His Omega had spoken and, unlike the late Lucas Caine, he would obey his Omega without question. Now he served Troy with the same quiet dedication. And for what he lacked in verve and panache he made up for with a solid, no-nonsense common sense and a calm and thorough way of thinking. He was Troy's perfect positive foil.

As well as Rufus, Troy had seconded the Knight of the Holy See, Dietz Muller, to help with the training of the Pack. And, although the Pack would never dream of arguing or disobeying their new Alpha there was a definite sense of unrest amongst them. The fact of the matter was that Pack did not train. Pack was strength in itself. They were werewolf. Proud. Independent. Strong.

They were not a company of troops to be disciplined and coached in fighting methods. It was unnatural and unwanted. And, as far as they were concerned, unnecessary. So they did as they were told but worked only to the letter.

It was frustrating the new Alpha to no end and he was close to snapping.

Strangely enough it was Muller, the only non-wolf, who broke the impasse.

The whole Pack, except for Troy, had changed to wolf form and Troy was attempting to get them to move together in formation. A sort of wolf-close-order-march. Instead it looked more like a bunch of individuals walking in roughly the same direct whilst constantly looking all over the place.

Muller put his hands on his hips and laughed out loud. The Pack stopped and stared at him. Their golden eyes not blinking. Jaws open. Tongues lolling out.

Rufus morphed smoothly into human form. 'What's so amusing, church man?' He asked.

The grizzled knight raised an eyebrow. 'Oh,' he said in mock surprise. 'Did you think that I was amused? I see, you thought that I was laughing at something funny.' He shook his head. 'No,' he continued. 'I was laughing scornfully. I was laughing at your pathetic attempt to be better than you are. I was laughing derisively.'

Some of the other Pack members changed back to human form.

Others stayed as wolves, growling their displeasure at the knight's disdain.

'You speak out of place,' said Rufus. 'I would watch myself if I were you.'

Muller shook his head. 'I am not you,' he said. 'I am Sergeant Dietz Muller of the Holy See and I have personally killed over one hundred and twenty vampires. How many have you killed?' He asked Rufus. Then he faced the Pack. 'How many have you all killed? You advise me to watch myself. You dare to threaten me? I watched your Alpha destroy ten of your best without even breaking a sweat.' He turned to face Troy. 'Tell me, Alpha,' he asked. 'Could you have taken on ten Bloodwraiths and won? Could you even have survived?'

Troy shook his head.

'Could you have taken on five?'

Troy put his hand out and rocked it from side to side. 'Maybe.'

'Enough said,' continued the knight. 'So what would happen if fifty Bloodwraiths attacked you lot? Or a hundred? I'll tell you what … dead. All of you.'

There was a shamefaced silence amongst the wolves. Eventually Rufus spoke. 'But how does what we are doing help?'

'Discipline,' answered Muller. 'Control. Tactics. Awareness.' He took a deep breath, contemplating his next words. 'Many years ago, when the mighty Roman Empire ruled the world, who did Julius Caesar acknowledge as the greatest warrior nation?'

'The Romans, obviously,' answered Rufus. There was a general mumble of agreement from the Pack.

Muller shook his head. 'No. Around fifty BC Caesar pronounced that there was no greater warrior than the Celt and his broadsword. His actual words were*, I can see no man in all my Empire that could stand toe to toe with the Celt and win. Weight for weight the Celt and his broadsword constitute the single mightiest warrior in the world*.'

'Well then how come the Romans kicked their asses?' Asked one of the Pack members.

'Because the Romans were the greatest soldiers in the world,' countered Muller. 'You, the Pack. You are the Celts. But the Bloodwraiths are more disciplined. They have been trained by one Nathan Tremblay, an ex-Shadowhunter. So they know how to fight. In battle they don't all just do as they would, they do things according to a plan. And that is what your Alpha is trying to get you to do. Instead of a group of single men with broadswords he wants to meld you into a single organism. A true Pack. One mind, one goal. One outcome. Victory.'

There was a pause before Rufus spoke. 'We understand.' He turned to Troy and went down on one knee. 'I apologize for my obtuseness,

Alpha.'

Troy nodded. 'Good. Now, let us start from the beginning.'

As one the Pack became wolves once again.

***

It had been a long day. Under Muller's auspices the Pack had trained together in close combat. Muller had broken them down into teams of three. He called them 'Combat Units'. Between Troy and himself they had figured out a way that they thought would give them an advantage when fighting the Bloodwraiths. Firstly the wolves would stay ranked together, no single one charging into battle by himself. Next, whenever a Bloodwraith was attacked it would be done by a three wolf 'Combat Unit'. The combined attack by three coordinated wolves should make short work of even the best that the vamps could offer. And at the same time that the Combat Unit was attacking the rest of the Pack would keep the other Bloodwraiths off that team's back.

Simple in planning but immensely difficult in practicality.

But both Muller and Troy were confident that the Pack would get it right.

After he had knocked the Pack off for the day, Troy had decided that he needed some alone time and had retained his wolf form to run through the surrounding forest. He had no specific plan, simply run free. After an hour or so he decided to head back, his mind clear and his muscles comfortably tired. About a mile from the house he picked up a familiar scent and stopped running, moving ahead in a slow loping motion, flitting from shadow to shadow as the sun went down. Invisible and silent.

Up ahead in a small clearing he saw William and Emily. They were walking. Side by side. Their hands not quite touching.

And then William turned to Emily, held her face in his hands and kissed her.

It wasn't until that moment that Troy realized the depth of his feelings for the girl that had just become the Daywalker.

But there was nothing that he could do. The Omega had chosen and Troy was Pack. With a feeling approaching despair he crushed his emotions and packaged them away in a shady recess of his soul. Emily was untouchable. The Omega's mate was sacrosanct.

Troy no longer felt like going home and instead he turned and ran back into the forest.

Back into the coming night.

Back into the darkness.

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Chapter 7

On the face of it, Nathan's plan was a lesson in simplicity. But, like many simple things, it hid behind it's façade a raft of complexities that made it less of a fixed plan and more of a general idea.

Bluntly put, the general idea that the ex-Shadowhunter had come up with was…use the power and resources of the *Nosferatu* to subjugate, take control of and command the entire criminal underworld of the United Kingdom, starting with London. All organized crime from illegal gambling and protection rackets through to prostitution and people trafficking.

Then, when he had achieved *de facto* control, he would use his criminal network to track down Emily and her wolves so that he could exterminate them utterly and completely.

His next step would be to put his idea to the Elders as he was wont to do by order of the *Capo. H*e knew that to get anything past them he would need to solidify his idea. He would need facts, figures, dates and a plan of action. As well as that he would need a good reason to drive the whole thing.

Obviously the move would bring more power to the brethren. As well as vast quantities of wealth. However, that in itself would not be enough. No, the *Nosferatu* were already a spectacularly wealthy organization. As for power, many in the upper echelons felt that they already wielded enough of that, although Nathan disagreed. But the one trump card was the *Corona Potestatum*. The *Capo* was still obsessed with the artifact and any chance of acquiring it would give impetus to Nathan's plan.

Nathan left his room to demand assistance from the brethren in the house.

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Chapter 8

They were a fairly obscure Cornwall based chapter of the brethren. But this year they were hosting a get-together. Mainly younger vamps, turned between ten and twenty years before. But also a few Elders. Hundreds of years old. Powerful.

They even had two Bloodwraiths in the group of revelers.

They all had one thing in common. They worshipped Nathan Tremblay. They considered him to be the answer to all that they considered right and correct. Vampires should rule. Humanity were little less than cattle or, at best, servants for their pleasure.

The *Nosferatu* should rule the night and, via familiars and proxies, the days as well. The *Potestatum* must be found and given to Nathan so that he could lead through moonlight and sunlight.

He was the way, the truth and the darkness.

They had decided that tonight they would be making a statement. A mass 'culling' as it were.

On the edge of a small coastal village near St. Ives a music festival, Don't Wake the Dolphins, was held every year, attracting a couple of a thousand people.

A variety of music, vegetarian food stalls, recreational drugs, alcohol and, new this year - death at the hands of a blood-sucking monster.

There were seventeen vamps, and they planned to hit the festival at eleven o'clock that night after the main act had been on stage for some twenty minutes. That way they would have a target rich environment. There was no going back. The world would know that vampires existed and the Elders would have to change their archaic ways of thinking and they would be forced into the new world order.

At ten o'clock a group of six of the younger vamps gathered in the ruined, late Saxon village church situated some half a mile from the festival. The rest would join them soon. Above them an ancient gargoyle by the name of Igneous Serpentine awoke from his near slumber and contacted Coldstone.

In turn Coldstone called out to Emily.

Ten minutes later, Emily, Sylvian, Troy, Muller and Latobias stood outside the Eurocopter.

'Is this it?' Asked Troy.

Emily shook her head. 'We're waiting for Tag. Unfortunately both William and Bastian are in London. But Coldstone says that there are

only six vamps and none of them seem to be Elders. So it shouldn't be a problem.'

As she finished speaking, Tag appeared. He was dressed in full battle gear and was carrying a General Electric minigun complete with two thousand rounds of ammunition, an electric drive motor for the barrels and two large car batteries to power the set up. Approximately four hundred pounds of equipment. He carried the minigun in one hand like it weighed no more than an assault rifle.

Sylvian shook his head. 'No ways, Tag. You can't bring that. Hell, where did you get it?'

'It's William's,' answered the big man. 'It's my new choice of weapon. Cool, hey?'

Again the Frenchman shook his head. 'Too much chance of collateral damage,' he said. 'Not safe. You simply cannot go into urban situations with that quantity of firepower. I mean, that thing can level whole buildings.'

Tag's face fell. 'Ah, come on,' he argued. 'I'll be careful. Anyway, I've only got two thousand rounds so I won't be leveling any buildings, only blood suckers.'

'Oh let him bring it,' said Em. 'We're running out of time.'

Tag grinned and they piled into the helicopter. Latobias punched the coordinates into the satellite system and took off, the twin engines howling out into the night.

Ten minutes later a trip that should have taken almost an hour was complete and Latobias touched the helicopter down about a thousand yards from the church. Emily's team of five deplaned, leaving the wind god at the controls. They headed towards the church moving at a fast run.

Three hundred yards from the front entrance, Coldstone's voice echoed in Em's head.

'We have a problem,' he noted dryly. 'The six vampires have turned into seventeen. The extras must have arrived mere minutes before you, Serpentine ventures that there are a few Elders. Two of them seem different. Very powerful. I suggest that you abort the mission. You are drastically outnumbered by superior forces.'

'I'll check with the team,' pulsed Em. She held her hand up. 'Guys,' she said. 'Situation's changed. Looks like there are now seventeen blood suckers. At least two Elders, maybe more. Might even be those Bloodwraith things that we've encountered before. What do you reckon? We proceed or not?'

'I recommend we get some backup,' said Muller. 'Those are long odds, even for us.'

'Ultimately, it's your show, Emily,' said Sylvian. 'You are the guardian and the Daywalker, but I too suggest prudence.'

Em looked at Troy. ‘Not sure when we’ll get the chance to get so many together,’ said the Wolfman. ‘I reckon that we can take them if we go in hard and fast. It’s your call.’

Tag patted his minigun. ‘Bet you’re all glad that I brought Missus Jones along now.’

‘Missus Jones?’ Questioned Troy.

‘Yep,’ grinned the big man. ‘You know…*me and missus Jones, we got a thing going on, we both know it’s wrong, but it’s much too strong, to let it go now*.’

Sylvian shook his head. ‘*Merde*. Fine let’s do it, just watch where you point that thing,’ he said to Tag. ‘It’s a recipe for massive collateral damage.’

‘Me and the missus will be mighty careful,’ assured Tag. ‘Just if I shout *Get Down* then you all hit the floor.’

‘Right then,’ concluded Emily. ‘Nothing fancy, we go in via the front of the building and kill anyone inside. Let’s do it.’

Em took the lead, bursting into a run that covered the last three hundred yards in under four seconds. At that pace she would have run the one hundred meters in approximately one and a half seconds flat. Sylvian and Troy, merging into Wolfman mode as he ran, were mere seconds behind her. Bringing up the rear were Tag and Muller who, although fast, traveled at mere human speeds and would arrive at the church some thirty seconds after Emily.

The massive front doors to the church were closed but they were totally dilapidated and Emily went through them like they weren’t even there. Deathwalker the axe appeared in her right hand as she scanned the room.

The vamps were gathered in a circle around two of their number. The two vamps in the center of the circle wore deep maroon leathers and black cloaks. Their hair was white-blonde and hung past their shoulders. They both exuded an undeniable sense of power and confidence.

They also reacted instantly, breaking through the circle and launching themselves at Em. They were fast. Extremely fast.

But she was the Daywalker. And the power of the *Potestatum* crackled through her like bolts of electricity. Her axe spun and cleaved, nicking and cutting the Bloodwraiths but not quite striking close enough to deliver an incapacitating blow. The Bloodwraiths, in turn, split their attack, never standing together but launching themselves from two different directions at once. Darting in, slicing at Em and then backing off to repeat their attack from a different angle. They were well trained and fought with cool clam professionalism.

All around her Emily could sense the other vamps attacking Sylvian and Troy.

The Wolfman relied on his strength to keep the horde of blood suckers at bay. Picking up the one by his foot, Troy literally used him as a living cudgel to beat back the others, smashing them onto the stone walls and crushing them to the flagstone floor. Blood began to run like the very church itself was bleeding.

Sylvian, leapt and danced and turned. His rapier like a lance of light, so swift it was. Cutting, parrying and stabbing. Dismembered heads and limbs flew.

But there were many. Too many. And they were but three.

With a flick of her wrist, Emily reversed one of her strokes in midflight and the axe blade clove into the one Bloodwraiths, hammering through ribs and spine and spilling out its internal organs like so much offal. Em followed up with a forward thrust that took its head off; at the same time she was ducking and rolling to ready her position for taking on the next one.

Then they heard the shout. At the top of his voice.

'Get Down!'

Troy, Sylvian and Em simply dropped like puppets with the strings cut.

And the air above them turned to fire as Tag and Missus Jones filled the church with silver jacketed slugs.

The big man was carrying two thousand rounds of ammunition. The General Electric minigun fires at a rate of six thousand rounds a minute.

Exactly twenty seconds later the only sounds left were the plinking of the superheated barrels of the machine gun, the odd piece of masonry falling to the floor and, unbelievably, the mewling and whining of the few vampires that had actually managed to live through the veritable firestorm that Tag had unleashed on them.

The big man spat on one of the wounded vamps. 'Should have brought more ammo,' he said.

Em walked over to the nearest wounded vampire, stood over him and then, her face devoid of expression, slowly pushed the twin points of her axe into his chest. The blood sucker screeched in agony but she didn't stop. Nor did she speed up. It took a full half a minute to sever his spine and kill him.

Then she walked over to the next one and calmly sliced off his one arm before leaning her axe on his throat and cutting into his neck in small, treacle slow increments.

Sylvian strode over to her and grabbed her arm. 'What are you doing?'

Em looked up, a dreamlike expression on her face. 'They're evil,' she said, as if explaining to a child. 'We must punish them. They must be made to suffer.' She looked at Muller. 'Do you have any more of that

“Holy Water” on you?’

The knight nodded.

‘Well, there are two left alive. Sprinkle a bit on them. Let’s see how long they take to die.’

There was an uncomfortable silence in the church as the men stared dumfounded at Emily.

Then the sound of three quick shots rang out.

Emily snapped out of her reverie to see Tag standing over the dead bodies of the last vamps, a smoking Desert Eagle in his hand. All three had been dispatched with head shots, ending their misery.

The big man shook his head. ‘I don’t know where you were going, girly,’ he said. ‘And God knows I ain’t no fan of the blood suckers, but there’s a limit. I’ll torture them for information but not for fun. That’s wicked, man. And it don’t be right.’

Emily shrugged. ‘Whatever. Let’s clear this mess up and get home. I vote we bury them behind the old graveyard.’

She walked out of the church, dragging two of the bodies with her and, after glancing puzzledly at each other, the men followed suit.

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Chapter 9

‘She’s fast,’ said Sylvian.

‘You’re all fast,’ retorted Merlin.

The Bloodborn shook his head. ‘Not like her. She moves at over a hundred yards a second. Her reaction times seem to be close to instantaneous. And her strength. She smashed through a two ton oak church door like it was paper. Okay, it had seen better days but I couldn’t have done it.’

‘We knew that the *Potestatum* would enhance her. And we accepted that. She is pure of heart and mind. A truly good person.’

Sylvian took a deep breath. ‘That’s what I wanted to discuss,’ he said as he went on to tell the magician about Emily torturing the wounded blood suckers.

After he had finished Merlin took a while to load his pipe and set it to flame. He puffed away for a while, staring into space. ‘Right. I’m going to have a chat to the Prof. Then I’ll need to speak to Emily. This is not good. As of this moment she could quiet possibly be the most powerful living creature on this planet. We can’t afford to have her going dark on us. Who knows where that might lead?’

***

‘I’m not going to beat around the bush, Emily,’ stated Merlin. ‘Fact is that we’re all a little worried about you at the moment. Nothing that serious, simply wondering if you feel out of sorts. On edge. Different in some way. After all, you have experienced some rather dramatic changes.’

Emily laughed sardonically. ‘No shit? I lost my foster parents, found out that one of my friends had willingly become a vampire, then he killed me and turned me into a blood sucking monster, then I killed like about a hundred people because they were slave traders and finally I sort of absorbed the *Corona Potestatum* and now I am The Daywalker. Note, please, not *A* Daywalker but *The* Daywalker. So, do I feel on edge? Somehow a little stressed? Well what the hell do you think?’

Merlin nodded in understanding. The Prof however walked right up to the teenage girl and stared openly at her, his head tilted to one side.

‘What?’ Demanded Emily.

‘Merely observing your autonomic responses, my dear,’ he said. ‘Skin tone, heart rate, breathing. Stress levels. You see,’ continued the Prof. ‘Merlin said that he wasn’t going to beat about the bush and then he proceeded to do exactly that. Strange.’

‘What do you mean?’ Asked Em.

‘I mean, what he really wanted to ask was, why did you torture the wounded vampires in the church? Was it for pleasure? Information? Some misguided sense of honor? Quite frankly it worries us. We were wondering if you were starting to lose your mind.’

‘No, don’t hold back, Prof,’ quipped Em. ‘Say what you mean.’

The Prof, who simply did not understand sarcasm, looked puzzled. ‘I thought that I just did,’ he said.

Emily shook her head. ‘Look, I don’t know what came over me,’ she said. ‘Call it battle fatigue. Stress. Whatever. It won’t happen again so relax.’

‘Okay,’ conceded Merlin. ‘But any problems please come straight to me. No man is an island and so on. I’m here to help.’

Emily leaned over and kissed Merlin on the cheek. ‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘I’ll remember that.’

The two ancient men watched Emily leave the room. Finally the magician spoke.

‘What do you think?’ He asked the Prof.

‘I think,’ answered the Prof. ‘That we have a big problem.’

‘So do I,’ agreed Merlin. ‘So do I.’

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Chapter 10

He was known to all as Mister Stopes. Any other forms of address were out of bounds. This included honorifics such as, Sir, Boss or Esquire. If people used any of these other forms of address, Mister Stopes thought that they were taking the piss. As a result, Mister Stopes considered them to be disrespectful.

And nobody in their right mind would wish to be disrespectful to Mister Stopes.

Five foot five inches of thick-set muscle, a face like a bulldog and more pent up rage than an active volcano were all testament that Mister Stopes had come up the hard way. He had been born in the sitting room of a dilapidated Victorian terrace house in the Elephant & Castle, London, in the late seventies to a single mum. Five sisters. No brothers. His father had left when he was but two days old. His dear mum had taken on three jobs just to keep them fed. The world goes on about the English welfare state but the fact of the matter was that it was easy to fall outside of the net. Together the family earned just enough to disqualify them from state handouts but not quite enough to have any quality of life.

Mister Stopes' mum died when he was seven. In true East End tradition this made him the head of the house.

And from that day on he was known to all as Mister Stopes. Admittedly, for the first few years he was Young Mister Stopes. But after he killed his first man at the tender age of eleven the "Young" moniker was dropped and the meteoric criminal career of Mister Stopes began.

He still lived in the Elephant & Castle. No need to move, he always told everyone. If the area was good enough for me mum then it's good enough for me. Of course he didn't live in an old terrace house. No. Mister Stopes lived in a penthouse apartment overlooking the Tate Modern Gallery. Five bedrooms, massive living rooms and its own private elevator.

It also had a special room. A room where Mister Stopes conducted a fair amount of his business. He called it his study.

Others referred to it as The Bunker or sometimes The Cold Room.

The Bunker was currently in use. Mister Stopes was conducting a business meeting.

'Now listen, Harry,' he said. His voice reasonable. His tone almost

caring. ‘All I’m saying is, you give me six thousand Pounds Sterling every week. In return you get to control all the businesses South of Gordon road. Now that seems to be fair and reasonable deal. Don’t you agree?’

Harry nodded frantically and, at the same time, mumbled what was probably a fervent expression of agreement.

Mister Stopes turned to a human gorilla in a cheap suit standing next to Harry. ‘Do me a favor, Ben,’ asked Mister Stopes. ‘I believe that Harry wants to say something. Why don’t you take the duct tape off his mouth in order to help facilitate our discourse?’

‘Sure fing, Mister Stopes,’ grunted Ben as he yanked the length of duct tape from Harry’s mouth. Harry immediately started talking.

‘I’m sorry about the late payment, sir,’ he blurted. ‘I gave you most of it. It wasn’t my fault.’

Mister Stopes stepped forward, his face red with anger. ‘Who’s your sir?’ He snapped. ‘Do I look like a bleedin’ sir? I’m an honest working man, Harry. You won’t find no airs and graces with Mister Stopes. No, Harry.’ The gangster cocked his right arm back. ‘Now brace yourself, Harry,’ he advised. ‘This is going to sting a bit.’ Mister Stopes’ fist snapped forward and smashed into Harry’s nose. The sound of the bone breaking was plainly audible. Like a boot stepping on gravel. The chair that Harry was tied to rocked back but stayed upright.

‘Right, Harry. No more excuses. This is the way it works, you lean on the punters and they pay you. Anyone steps out of line and you and your boys sort them out, break a few arms, maybe the odd fire. You know the business. Now, and this is the important part, you take a percentage of the money that you collect and you give it to me. And you owe me one thousand two hundred of her majesties Pounds. I’m going to let you go now, Harry boy. Now, I’m not an unreasonable man, It’s almost nighttime so I won’t insist on full payment in the morning. But tomorrow, evening you will be back here with my money plus another two grand in interest. Do you understand?’

Harry nodded. He knew better than to argue.

Mister Stopes patted Harry on the head. ‘Good boy. I’ll see you tomorrow.’ Mister Stopes turned and walked from the room. As he reached the door he called out to his gorilla. ‘Ben.’

‘Yes Mister Stopes.’

‘Another small favor. You got a blade on you?’

‘Of course, Mister Stopes.’

‘Good man. Cut off Harry’s right thumb. Just a small reminder, wouldn’t want him to forget his meeting tomorrow.’

Ben nodded.

Harry started to scream.

***

While Mister Stopes was carrying out his particular style of business management, Coldstone the gargoyle was contacting Emily again. After a short discourse she ran into the kitchen looking for Latobias.

He was sitting at the table sipping tentatively at a mug of Tag's tea. The big man was smiling. 'Told you so. You mustn't settle for that weak-ass tea that you been drinking. Gods should have proper tea. So strong that you can see the flavor. Lots of milk. Lots of sugar.'

The Celtic god of wind grimaced but persevered.

'Latobias,' called Emily. 'We've got eyes on. A group of vamps in a village in Essex. Next to the Stour river. How long to get us there?'

'Ten minutes,' grunted the god.

'How?' Asked Em. 'It took ten minutes to get to get to St. Ives, and that's only a quarter of the distance.'

'Ten minutes,' repeated Latobias. Then he closed his eyes, downed the tea and smiled. 'Not bad, all things considered.'

Tag grinned.

'Right, suit up,' commanded Em. 'Find Sylvian, Muller and Bastian if you can. I'll get Troy.'

'Can I bring Missus Jones?' Asked the big man.

'How could I break up such a meaningful relationship?' Questioned Em. 'Bring her, but keep her quiet unless we really need her.'

Tag nodded and left at a run.

Minutes later they were in the air heading north, the ground below them speeding by at an impossible rate.

'How fast are we going?' Asked Bastian.

'As fast as we need to,' answered Latobian.

'Could you go faster?'

The god nodded. 'I could. You couldn't. Nor could the machinery.'

'How much faster?' Continued Bastian.

Latobian didn't answer.

Bastian asked again but then it became obvious to him that Latobian wasn't going to answer. In fact he was utterly ignoring the Shadowhunter as if he weren't even there.

Exactly ten minutes after they had taken off the helicopter flared down in a clearing next to the river.

Em concentrated and called on the gargoyle that was directing them. 'Veldspar?'

'I hear you, guardian,' he responded.

'Where are they?'

'Next to the docks there is a camp site. Small wooden houses. Some of them are occupied. I can see them from the top of the church spire. The *Nosferatu* are heading down through the surrounding woodlands towards the occupied cabins.'

'How many?'

‘Six.’

‘Thanks, keep an eye out for any more. Right, guys,’ continued Em. ‘Follow me.’

‘Not so fast this time,’ urged Tag. ‘Me and Missus Jones prefer the slow and steady method and at the rate that you travel things be all done by the time we get there.’

Emily winked and took off, her speed turning her into a mere glimmer of light in the darkness. A veritable will-o-wisp flickering through the forest.

‘Shit,’ shouted Tag. ‘Get after her,’ he gestured at Sylvian and Troy. ‘We’ll follow.’

The Bloodborn and the Wolfman accelerated to top speed, Bastian followed close behind, his Shadowhunter enhanced speed allowing him to almost keep up with them.

Behind them ran Tag and Muller, arms pumping, breathing like steam engines.

By the time that Troy and Sylvian caught up with Emily it was all over. The six vamps lay scattered about her like dolls after a child’s tantrum. Not one limb was still attached. Not one head still rest atop its own body. Even their torsos were cleft in twain.

And Em was covered from head to toe in blood.

She looked up at them and grinned, her white teeth a shocking contrast to the deep red gore that coated her face. ‘Hey, look at the Johnny come latelys,’ she said with a laugh. ‘Sorry, guys. Early bird gets the worm and all that. Weren’t enough to go around. Better luck next time.’ She absent mindedly flicked her axe at a severed head, loping off its nose. ‘Oops,’ she giggled.

Bastian came running up and stopped, his face a picture of horror. ‘Good God, Emily,’ he gasped. ‘What have you done? I mean, why?’

Em turned to face him. ‘What have I done? I would think that is a little obvious, Bastian. I have killed a group of blood sucking monsters before they killed any more innocent human beings.’

Bastian nodded. ‘Yes,’ he agreed. ‘But…’ he gestured at the bloody carnage. ‘Was this necessary?’

‘Dead is dead, Bastian. Or would you prefer to make them go sit on the naughty step and promise not to feed on any humans again?’ Emily took a step towards him. Her eyes blazed with an inner red light. ‘Is that what you would prefer,’ she yelled.

Bastian fell to his knees, grabbing his head with both hands as he did so. ‘Stop, Em. It hurts.’

Em swept her gaze over Sylvian and Troy. ‘And you two? Would you also like to treat these monsters with kid gloves?’

Both the Bloodborn and the Wolfman took a step back as Emily’s savage coercion smashed into them, flaying their minds with power.

Then they too dropped to their knees.

Tag and Muller came staggering to a halt, breathing hard and took in the scene with shocked faces. Muller ran up to Emily and grabbed her by the shoulders. ‘Stop,’ he shouted. ‘You’re killing them.’

But Em merely growled and punched him in the center of his chest, hammering him into a tree and rendering him unconscious.

Tag stood in front of her and shook his head. ‘Don’t do it, girly,’ he said softly. ‘Tag, he be your friend. Just calm down.’

But Emily was too far gone. She raised her hands to strike.

Then there was a massive implosion of air as Latobian suddenly appeared in front of her.

The Daywalker turned her coercion on the god. ‘Step aside,’ she growled. ‘I mean them no harm, they merely need to learn their place. I am The Daywalker. They are nothing.’

Latobian spread his arms wide and a wall of wind swept towards Emily, spinning and turning, it surrounded her until she was in the eye of a mini tornado. She lashed out at it with her axe but to no avail.

Then the wind god gestured towards Troy. ‘You can communicate with her,’ he said. ‘Talk to her.’

The wolf nodded as he concentrated on the Pack connection with the Daywalker. But he sensed straight away that mere discussion would achieve naught. Instead he focused on feelings. Emotions. Shared moments.

His feelings for her.

And Emily dropped to her knees with a cry of anguish.

Immediately the wind stopped.

Troy ran forward and put his arms around the teenage girl, holding her softly as she wept.

‘What am I becoming?’ She asked as she looked into the young wolf’s eyes.

Troy shook his head. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Help me,’ she whispered. ‘Please.’

And Troy picked her up and carried her back to the helicopter followed by the rest of the team.

By the time they got back to the aircraft, Emily was in a dead sleep, her breathing slow and deep. Troy leaned her against the side of the copter and sat next to her, keeping his arms around her.

‘Hey, wind-man,’ said Tag as Latobian took off. ‘Not sure what you did back there but thanks. Things were getting unraveled real quick and I for one didn’t know what to do next.’

‘Me too,’ added Bastian. ‘Man, when she grabbed my brain I would have done anything that she told me to. Anything. It’s like someone took away all thought and reason and replaced it with a deep need to

do whatever she wanted. And it hurt like hell.' He turned to Latobian. 'How come it didn't affect you?'

Latobian raised an eyebrow. 'I am a god.'

'Oh, true,' conceded Bastian. 'Sorry.'

'Nothing to apologize for,' responded the wind god. 'Truth be told, it was a close run thing. I am not sure how much longer I could have resisted her. She is, beyond doubt, the most powerful mortal that I have ever come across. And I have been around for a very, very long time.'

'How long to get home?' Asked Sylvian.

Latobias tilted his head to one side and smirked slightly.

'Oh, of course,' muttered Sylvian. 'Ten minutes.'

The god nodded. 'Ten minutes.'

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Chapter 11

The council of Elders had rejected Nathan's plan out of hand. In fact, they had barely allowed him to start talking before they started shaking their heads in disapproval.

'Too risky,' they had said. 'Unnecessary,' they had chided him. 'The *Nosferatu* already had enough wealth. Enough power. What they needed now was patience, not open warfare with the humans.'

'But the *Potestatum*,' he had said. Playing his trump card.

'There are other ways to seek the relic,' they had informed him. 'Ways that were far less confrontational.'

And then they had dismissed him like an errant schoolboy at the headmaster's office. Indulgent smiles on their faces and weakness in their hearts.

Needing time alone, Nathan had run into the forests that surrounded the lodge. He had come across a herd of deer and had launched himself at them, ripping and tearing. Killing for killing's sake.

Then he sat amongst the animal corpses and screeched his frustration at the moon. Cursing the *Capo* and his acolytes. Swearing to himself that he would have revenge for their petty attitudes, for their disdain. Vowing that he would take the *Nosferatu* into battle against humanity. His hatred and anger was a palpable thing. And that, combined with the dozen animals he had just inadvertently sacrificed to his own altar of war, reached out and called.

It called for help. It called for power.

It called out to the gods of war.

And one of them answered.

A massive crow appeared in the air in front of the ex-Shadowhunter/vampire. Fully ten feet across and surrounded by a nimbus of glowing blue light. It hovered in the still air, wings not moving, it's black and soulless eyes staring at him.

Nathan flinched in surprise. 'What the hell are you?'

The crow cocked its head to one side and then folded its wings to land on the ground where it flowed into the shape of an ancient woman.

'Many know me as Freya, others as Ogoun or Agriona. Some as Morgana or, Morgan la Fey. Others call upon me as, The Morrigan.'

'The goddess of war,' breathed Nathan. 'What are you doing here?'

'You called me, child,' responded the Morrigan. 'By sacrifice and by

need you called. And I answered.'

'Sacrifice?'

The goddess gestured towards the piles of dead deer stacked about the vampire.

Nathan nodded. 'They were less sacrifice and more fit of pique,' he admitted.

'It matters not,' assured the Morrigan. 'You offered up lives and you called out. Strangely enough, Nathan Tremblay, I have been looking for you. And now, in the most delicious of ironies, *you* found *me*.' The old woman shrugged. 'But so is life. Full of contradictions and wrong turns, suffice to say that as long as the game is being played there are no incorrect moves. So, tell me, young vampire, what is your heart's desire?'

'Power,' answered Nathan without need for thought.

'So human,' said the Morrigan sadly. 'Always power. You have been given the gift, or curse, of near immortality,' she said. 'And instead of striving to use that time for the furtherment of mankind you choose instead to rule. To decree. To subjugate. How disappointingly human of you.'

'I am not human,' argued Nathan.

The Morrigan waved her hand. 'Close enough. Closer than you even realize. Well,' she continued. 'You called. Talk to The Morrigan about your quest for power and she will see if she deigns to help.'

So Nathan, feeling that he had little to lose, confided in the Morrigan, telling her his plans, his ambitions and the spurning of them by the committee of Elders.

And finally of his inability to combat the *Capo* due to the superior strength of the ancient vampire.

The Morrigan listened.

'I shall help,' she said.

Nathan sneered. 'How?' He asked. 'And even if you could, what would I owe you?'

The goddess shrugged. 'Would the cost matter?'

Nathan laughed. 'True. Probably not. Go ahead then, old woman. Tell me your plan.'

The Morrigan smiled and morphed into her guise of Morgan la Fey. Tall, beautiful. Beguiling.

Nathan gasped in wonder and lust.

'I shall gift you with the power of Eris,' she said. 'It brings with it the ability to sow fear and discord in the minds of even the most powerful of adversaries. This will render them weak and disoriented. Open to a strike. But use it frugally for it is a limited gift. The human physiogamy, even one as upgraded as yours, can retain only enough power for one use.'

‘How do I use it?’ Asked Nathan.

‘You shall know when the time comes,’ reassured the Morrigan.

‘Will it allow me to defeat the *Capo*?’

‘Perhaps,’ answered the Morrigan. ‘If your will is strong enough. If your desire is deep enough.’

‘It is,’ insisted Nathan.

‘I believe you,’ said the Morrigan as she faded back into the form of a giant crow and slowly drifted up through the forest canopy and into the night sky. Her mood full of satisfaction. It had been an unbelievable stroke of luck that the vampire had been calling for her just as she was attempting to track down his whereabouts. And now she had turned the game more to her liking. Escalating it my many magnitudes.

For was she not the goddess of war? If it were up to Merlin and his cohorts, she would be a mere goddess of minor scuffles and inconveniences. Small battles between groups of vampires and wolves. Deaths that numbered in the single or low double figures. A game that was hardly worth playing.

But now, by giving Nathan more power, she had opened up the vista. She had escalated the conflict. With the psychotic ex-Shadowhunter in charge of the *Nosferatu* there would be a tenfold increase in violence. Untold more bloodshed. Deaths in the triple or even quadruple figures.

The streets would run red with blood and her power would increase exponentially.

Of course she would never ultimately side with the vampires. Well, she didn’t think that she would, she saw no reason to…but that was the future and the Morrigan lived in the now.

And behind her, in the forest, Nathan Tremblay smiled as his future stretched out on front of him.

His very own blood-drenched road to Eldorado.

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Chapter 12

Emily sat on the edge of the sofa, her legs pulled up, arms wrapped around them. She had stopped weeping but her eyes were still puffy and red-rimmed.

The Prof and Merlin stood uncomfortably in the center of the room. Both of the old men were packing their pipes. A sure sign that neither actually wanted to talk and were putting off the inevitable.

'Someone say something,' said Emily, her voice barely above a whisper.

'Well, it's the *Potestatum*,' ventured the Prof.

'Obviously,' agreed Merlin.

'It's…umm… very powerful,' continued the Prof. 'Allegedly part of the blade of Excalibur. Actually, Merlin would know more about that than me.'

'Yes, thank you, Professor.'

'My pleasure.'

'Look, Emily, I'm afraid that I don't have very good news,' said Merlin. 'The simple fact is that you have been merged with an elemental power that has changed you on a physical and mental level. It has done the impossible by curing you of the Vampire virus, inuring you against its ill effects and at the same time increasing your strength and speed to quiet phenomenal levels. But, in doing so it has pushed you capabilities beyond those that a human being is capable of operating under. Fortunately, strictly speaking, you are not one hundred percent human. You are a Shadowhunter. The last in a long line of. This alone is keeping you alive under such great stresses. So, what the *Potestatum* is doing to ensure your survival is that it is making you less human and in doing so, ensuring your survival. Do you understand?'

Emily nodded. 'So what you are saying is that, instead of being a blood-sucking monster the *Potestatum* is turning me into a megalomaniacal, self serving, narcissistic, amoral monster that will soon not retain even a speck of humanity.'

'Exactly,' agreed the Prof. 'Well surmised, young girl.'

'Professor, shut up,' snapped Merlin.

The Prof looked hurt but did stop speaking.

'What can we do?'Asked Em.

'I don't know,' admitted Merlin. 'If we had another piece of the

blade, perhaps. Some other source of power. I'm so sorry, my girl. I would ask The Morrigan for her counsel but she has been away, god knows where. I have sent out a seeking spell but to no avail. The only advice that I can give is, fight it. Fight those feelings. Remember your humanity, hang onto it at all costs. We are all here to help. You are surrounded by those who love you. Remember that at all times.'

'Platitudes,' murmured Emily. 'You're asking me to piss on the fire of London in an attempt to put it out.'

Merlin frowned at Emily's choice of words but didn't deny it. There was no point in lying. He put his hand on her shoulder. 'We shall keep trying,' he assured her. 'Trust me, between the Prof and I we have many centuries of knowledge. We will find a way to control this thing.'

Emily nodded, stood up and left the room, closing the door behind her.

***

That night Coldstone contacted her. 'Three vamps,' he informed in his gravelly voice. 'Small village outside Salisbury. They seem to be planning to feed on a group of people dressed as druids, heading for Stonehenge.'

Emily pulsed Troy and relayed the information.

'Great,' he responded. 'See you at the helicopter in five. I'll collect the rest of the team.'

'I'm not coming,' pulsed Emily.

'What? Why not?'

'I'll lose control, Troy,' she said. 'We both know that I will. I simply cannot stop it. The overwhelming urge to destroy in the worst way possible. Once it starts, I can't seem to be able to differentiate between the enemy and the people that I love. I can't risk it. Take one of your wolves instead. In fact,' continued Em. 'Don't take the usual team. It's time to blood your Pack. Take four wolves with you. See how their training has helped them.'

Troy gave a mental nod. 'Good idea,' he said. 'When I get back, we'll talk.'

'Whatever,' responded Emily. 'Be safe.'

Minutes later she heard the clatter of the helicopter taking off and hammering away into the night sky.

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Chapter 13

Larry and Barry Plumpton still lived at home. With their mum. They were identical twins. Larry was the oldest of the two by seven minutes. They both sported schoolboy haircuts, short back and sides with side-partings. Pencil mustaches and small triangular goatee beards.

The Twins were what is technically referred to as mildly schizophrenic with sociopathic tendencies. Or as the word on the street was, complete nutters.

In fact the only person more feared by the criminal underworld in London and surrounds was their mum, known to all as Aunt Plumpton, or simply Aunty. And she ruled her domain with an iron fist wrapped in a velvet glove. In the main, Aunty controlled drugs, gambling and high-class prostitution that, in turn, gave her a certain amount of clout with the political elite who were oft addicted to all three of the vices she dealt in.

She left protection rackets, GBH and robbery to the criminal gangs that she considered to be the bottom feeders. People like Mister Stopes. Or the Naidoo Family, originally from Calcutta. The only gangs that she kept well away from were the ones that operated out of Chinatown. As Aunt Plumpton always said, ‘The sames with the sames and the different with the differents’.

And anyway, the Chinese gangs made her feel uncomfortable with their tattoos and strange traditions and bowing. She referred to them as ‘Nasty foreign muck’, and anyone with any sense merely nodded in agreement or mumbled a ‘Yes, Aunty’. Because those who didn’t agree inevitably got a visit from The Twins. And anyone in their right minds would prefer to avoid that if it were in any way possible.

At the moment, The Twins were doing the rounds. Mum was very particular about the rounds. In the kitchen there was a whiteboard and on the whiteboard was a weekly to-do list. Mostly this consisted of The Twins doing the rounds. Visiting their many Houses of ill Repute, as mum put it, as well as their upmarket opium dens and discreet gambling salons where gentlemen could gamble on the strangest of things.

When they did their rounds The Twins were chauffer driven. An old Jaguar. Their driver was an old Kenyan by the name of Monty. He had been in the families employ for over fifty years and, although both his

hearing and his eyesight were beginning to go, he knew London like a pair of his own underwear.

Ostensibly, when in public, The Twins dressed similarly. Not identically. They both carried silver topped sword canes; they both wore three piece suits and silver watch chains. But the color of their suits differed. Whereas Larry, as the eldest, always wore a deep navy blue, Barry went for what he felt was a less ostentatious dark midnight blue. Thus they felt it was easy for anyone to tell them apart.

It was a Wednesday so the first stop on the list was Madame Petunia's.

Madame Petunia's was a brothel situated in Wimbledon, close to the hallowed courts but away from the hustle and bustle of the shopping areas. From the outside it looked like any other large, suburban mansion circa 1920's. Part Art Deco and part post-war concrete extension. On the automatic front gate, next to the intercom, there was a subtle brass plaque inscribed with the capital letters MP.

Needless to say, entrance was by invitation only.

After buzzing the intercom Monty drove The Twins around to the back entrance, stopped, alighted and opened the doors for them, saluting smartly as he did so.

As always, The Twins ignored him and proceeded through the back door into the establishment.

They were greeted by the manager of the house, Betty Grant. There was no actual Madame Petunia. There never had been.

'Mister Plumpton,' greeted Betty. 'And mister Plumpton,' she greeted again. 'May I take your coats?'

'No time, Betty,' answered Larry. As the older of the two, Larry always fielded the questions and did most of the talking. 'Flying visit, I'm afraid. Just collection, quick scan of the books.'

Betty bowed and led them through to the main office.

Unlike one would expect, the house was tastefully decorated. Original art on the walls, subdued colors, plush wool carpets and pot plants. More five star hotel than South-of-the-border brothel. Behind the closed doors of the twenty separate "Games Rooms" it was a different question. With names like, 'The Dungeon Room', 'The Naughty Boys Room', and 'The Scoutmasters Study', nothing was left to imagine what actually went on behind said doors. Suffice to say that the house did more spanking than it provided actual sex and, as such, it was particularly popular with Tory Politicians and Upper Class playboys.

It was also part of Aunty's biggest earners.

Betty handed over the ledgers and, while Larry perused them, she handed a large wad of cash to Barry who proceeded to count it.

Larry pushed the books away from him and steepled his hands.

‘Takings are slightly down on what I’d expected, Betty,’ he said.

‘I agree,’ added Barry after he had finished counting.

‘Well it’s all there, mister Plumpton and mister Plumpton,’ insisted Betty. ‘I checked it all myself.’

Larry shook his head. ‘Are the girls pooling their tips as we instructed?’ He asked. ‘Are we talking half and redistributing the rest?’

Betty nodded. ‘As always, sirs.’

Larry pulled the ledger towards him and opened it up again. Then he ran a finger down one of the columns. His finger stopped. ‘This girl,’ he said. ‘New, is she?’

Betty nodded. ‘Started a fortnight ago. Awfully good with the whip. Got the politicos lining up to get a spanking.’

‘Fetch her.’

Betty jumped up and ran from the room. Under a minute later she came back. Behind her a generously built woman, five ten, brown eyes, brunette, false eyelashes, wearing a rubber nurses outfit and ridiculously high heels, sashayed in.

Betty introduced her. ‘Mister and mister Plumpton, this is Miss Voluptua.’

The woman bowed slightly and batted her eyes. Then she leant forward, displaying an impressive cleavage, and ran her finger down Larry’s cheek. ‘I am pleased to meet you, you naughty boys,’ she breathed in a fake Russian accent.

‘Betty,’ said Larry. ‘Please inform this girl that if she touches me again I shall cut her finger off and stick it up her left nostril. And ensure that she appreciates that I am being deadly serious.’

Betty grabbed Miss Voluptua and pulled her back. ‘Listen, Love,’ she said. ‘You don’t go touching the bosses. They don’t take gladly to it.’

‘Now, what is our name?’ Asked Larry.

‘Miss Volu…’

‘Your real name, miss. Come along now, we’re all busy people.’

‘Sienna Morning.’

‘Real name,’ repeated Larry.

‘Oh,’ said the girl. ‘Sorry. I fought you meant my uvva real name. Oh, my name’s Chloe. Chloe Brown.’

‘Goo, now, Chloe, Chloe Brown. Did Betty explain to you the system regarding the cash tips that you receive?’

Chloe nodded. ‘We ‘and then in and then you give us some back.’

‘So why are you keeping half of your tips?’

‘Oh I ain’t, sir,’ protested Chloe.

‘Yes you are.’

Chloe put her hands on her hips. ‘I would never, sir,’ she insisted.

Larry sighed. ‘Barry,’ he gestured towards his minutes-younger brother.

Barry stood up, drawing a straight razor from his jacket pocket as he did so. With practiced ease he flicked it open. The scalpel sharp edge glowed like a line of ice as he stepped towards the young girl.

'Oy,' she said. 'What you going to do wiv that?'

Barry slashed the blade swiftly from side to side and then up and down.

Chloe squeaked in shock as the blade sliced through her outfit, barely touching her skin.

Her ridiculous rubber outfit fell in pieces to the floor leaving her naked but for an over-tight black lace bra.

And tucked into the bra were three twenty Pound notes.

Barry plucked them from their lacy constraint and handed them to Larry.

'We won't mention this again,' said the older twin. 'Suffice to say that both of you will have this week's wages docked from you salaries. You,' he said to Betty, 'for not paying due care and attention, and you,' he addressed Chloe, 'for stealing.'

He stood up. 'Come along, Barry. The morning is wasting.'

Barry left the room.

Larry, stopped on his way out, turned to Chloe. 'A word of advice, young girl,' he said.

Chloe nodded.

Larry bunched his fist and hit her in the stomach, moving forward as he did so. Putting his body behind the blow. The punch threw Chloe against the wall and she slid to the floor, her face ashen as she desperately tried to suck in some air. 'The next time that you step out of line I'm going to tell my mum. And you wouldn't like that.'

He nodded to Betty and left.

***

The Twins got home late that evening and when they walked into the kitchen, they both knew that they were in trouble.

Mum was sitting in her usual chair at the head of the kitchen table. On the table in front of her was a three foot Malacca cane. It was almost an inch thick. It was supple. It was heavy. And it was stained with blood.

She called her cane, 'Mister Twinkle-toes'. And she used it for disciplining The Twins.

Both Larry and Barry went pale at the sight.

'Evening, mum,' ventured Larry. 'Everything okay?'

Missus Plumpton nodded. 'Of course. Why wouldn't it be?'

Both Larry and Barry shrugged.

'Well,' continued the mum. 'I suppose there might be one small

thing.' She stood up, picking up the cane as she did so. Swishing it through the air. 'For example, someone might be stealing from me and then my sons, my own flesh and blood, might not be telling me. Or indeed, might not even be doing anything about it.'

'What do you mean, mum?' Asked Barry. 'No one's stealing from us. We'd know.'

'Oh, that's good,' retorted mum. 'So that floozy that you caught pocketing our cash today, not stealing?'

'It was a minor transgression, mum,' said Larry. 'We took care of it.'

Missus Plumpton shook her head. 'You did not take care of it,' she said, her voice barely above a whisper. 'I had to go out there and take care of it myself this afternoon when I found out. Now, you know the punishment for bad boys who don't do as they're told. Come on, bend over.'

With unshed tears in their eyes the two grown men pulled their trousers down and bent over the kitchen table. Missus Plumton counted off each stroke as she delivered them. Six of the best for each son. When she had finished, there was fresh blood on the cane.

'There you go, boys,' she said. 'All done. You know that I do this for your own good.'

They both nodded.

'Now, you have a nice hot bath. Put some Epson Salts in the water, that'll help with the healing. Then after that I need you to go back to Madame Petunia and help Betty get rid of the body.'

Again they nodded in unison.

'Yes, mum. Straight after our bath,' agreed Larry.

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Chapter 14

Nathan had decided on a guard of five. They were the very best of the best. All Bloodwraiths. All elders of more than five hundred years. And all fanatically loyal to both him and his ideas.

He called them his *Nightwalkers*.

And he took them to Italy with him. To seek an audience with the *Capo*. The master of all masters.

To inquire about his advice.

To ask for a boon.

And to kill him.

As usual, they had flown privately, at night, followed by a car ride in a blacked out limo. Upon arrival he and his crew were given rooms in the mansion that were commensurate with Nathan's rank.

As soon as they had settled, he approached the *Capo's* secretary and petitioned for a personal and private audience. The secretary bade him wait and, over half an hour later, informed Nathan that he had been refused. He explained that the *Capo* was extremely busy.

However, there was a function arranged for that evening. The chapter house was receiving the head of the Lithuanian *Nosferatu* along with his entourage and a formal dinner was being held in his honor. Nathan and his team were invited to attend. During the evening the *Capo* hoped that he would find some time for him and Nathan to talk.

The ex-Shadowhunter bowed his acceptance and left.

That evening Nathan and his Nightwalkers dressed for dinner. Like the Bloodwraiths, the Nightwalkers wore a uniform. In almost all aspects, it was the same as the Bloodwraiths leathers. The only difference being the color. Instead of deep maroon, they wore blue.

Royal blue as befitting the personal guard of a king.

They were ushered to their seats that were situated close enough to the head to avoid showing disrespect but far enough away to not show any favor.

There were another twenty vampires at the table. Ten Italians and ten Lithuanians. Along the walls stood another ten bodyguards. The meal started with a short speech by the *Capo*. He welcomed his guests and praised the head of the Lithuanian house for his loyalty and dependability. He did not stand while he spoke and he barely raised his voice. But Nathan could feel the ancient vampire's power and

coercion and it filled him with an emotion that came close to fear. But it was not true fear as the blade of the *Capo's* influence was blunted on the anvil of Nathan's overweening ambition.

Then the leader clapped his hands and dinner was dragged in.

A dozen young men and women. Naked. They had been bound and gagged via the use of leather straps and bright red rubber balls in their mouths. Because, while no one minds their food thrashing around a bit, it is decidedly unpleasant to hear them screaming and mewling while you ate. Especially at a formal dinner.

The vampires fed quickly and efficiently and in less than half an hour the bodies had been cleared away and the marble floor mopped of any excess spillage.

Nathan and his Nightwalkers had abstained.

It was then that Nathan stood to address the gathering. Uninvited and uncalled for.

'I stand before a group of old men,' he began. 'Weak. Pathetic. Spent. A gathering of cowards and vassals. Only days before I approached the elders' council with a plan.

A plan that would enrich the lives lf the *Nosferatu*. A plan that would increase our influence. Our power. Our wealth. A plan that would see us in our true places in this modern world. Not as skulkers in the dark but as kings of the night. Leaders of the world. Owners of the human race.

But that plan was rejected as were any other thoughts that I had for the betterment of the *Nosferatu*.'

When Nathan had started to talk the *Capo* had smiled in condescending amusement. But after a few lines he started to grow angry.

'Sit down, young Tremblay,' he commanded. 'Before I order my guards to make you do so.'

Nathan laughed loudly. 'Your guards couldn't make a kindergarten teacher sit. They are as venal and pathetic as you and the rest of this audience.'

The *Capo* gestured and the ten guards aligned along the walls moved to his command. But before they had taken two steps, the Nightwalkers were on them. And it was like a group of toddlers attempting to fight off a pack of pit-bulls. In mere seconds the *Capo's* bodyguards lay dismembered on the floor.

Nathan laughed again. 'Look,' he said to the *Capo*. 'Pathetic.'

The ancient leader of the *Nosferatu* stood up, his face a mask of controlled anger. 'Enough,' he hissed. 'Your insolence once amused me but now it offends. You have gone too far.' And he unleashed the full power of his coercion onto the young would-be usurper, crushing him to the floor.

Except, it didn't work.

Instead Nathan pushed back and released the power of Erin. Lashing out at the *Capo* with the strength of the very gods themselves. The room shook as if under an artillery bombardment. Windows shattered and flagstones buckled.

The two vampires, young and ancient faced each other across the table. Both stood stock still while all about them vortices of power swirled and coruscated. Paintings tore off the walls, drapes ripped and statues were sundered.

And slowly, the *Capo* started to sink to his knees.

As his knees struck the floor, Nathan was on him. His talons and fangs fully extended.

Smashing and ripping and slashing at the withered, old flesh. Tearing and slicing with abandon. Then he picked the *Capo* up with his right hand and, with his left, he grasped what was left of the ancient's neck, and tore his head from his body.

Instantly everyone in the room fell to their knees.

And as one they said the words.

'*Capo*. Lead us.'

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Chapter 15

The Prof opened the door to Em's room without knocking and stood staring at her. Then he approached and walked around her at arm's length, pausing every now and then to wave in the air with his right hand.

'Morning Prof,' greeted Em. 'Creepy much?'

The Prof shook his head. 'It's all wrong,' he muttered to himself.

'What?'

'Your aura. There's no other way of putting it apart from saying that it's all wrong. Well. Perhaps one could rather say that it is not correct. Parts are right.'

'What?' Questioned Emily again.

'These overwhelming feelings of superiority that you keep feeling,' he said. 'When do you feel them the most?'

Em shrugged. 'Random times, actually. But I suppose mainly when I'm under stress. Particularly combat.'

'Odd,' noted the Prof. 'You see, I've been thinking, and surely something as powerful as the *Potestatum* should be able to affect your thinking on a more constant basis. *Id Est*, you would feel superior, godlike even, all the time. Why only when you are under stress?'

'Well, I do have a fairly strong personality,' said Em. 'Probably find that has something to do with it.'

The Prof shook his head. 'No, not nearly strong enough to fight even the tiniest shard of Excalibur. Even King Arthur fell to its commands and Sir Lancelot himself fell completely under its spell and he was quite possibly the most saintly man that I have ever met. No, there is something else. Can you bring forth your axe? I think that may be it.'

Emily thought the axe into her right hand.

The Prof peered closely at it and waved his hands around the blade, tutting and humming as he did so. Eventually he shook his head. 'It has power, but not the correct sort. No, it's not that.'

'What exactly are you looking for?' Asked Em.

'A relic,' answered the Prof. 'Something with great power. There is something effecting the P*otestatum*…damned if I know what. This is very frustrating.'

Em thought for a while and then she pulled the medallion that Ryoko had given her out from her shirt. 'The Brightest Flame Casts the Deepest Shadow,' she said softly.

The Prof blinked and then did a double take. ‘How interesting,’ he said. ‘It has been hiding. I see it now but before, well, it simply wasn’t there.’ He walked to the door, poked his head out of the room and hollered for Merlin, magically enhancing the volume of his voice to ensure that the magician heard him. The magically amped-up call echoed about the house like a claxon, shivering the walls and windows in a gale of sound.

Merlin appeared at a run. ‘What?’ He yelled. ‘This had better be good, I spilt my tea.’ He gestured at his stained robe. ‘And this stuff that Tag brews doesn’t seem to come out in the wash. It’s so strong that it’s like a permanent tannin based dye. I have to use sorcery to get the stains out.’

The Prof merely pointed at Emily.

Merlin stared and was about to ask something when he did an identical double take to the one that the Prof had done. ‘God gods,’ he murmured. ‘Where did that come from?’

‘It’s always been here,’ said Em.

‘It’s been hiding,’ said the Prof with a grin. ‘Clever, isn’t it?’

Merlin peered closer at the medallion. ‘Remarkable,’ he said. ‘Absolutely remarkable.’

‘Is it fighting the *Potestatum*?’ Asked the Prof.

Merlin shook his head. ‘Doesn’t seem to be. Feels more like it’s attempting to join with it. But it can’t. *Yin and Yang*. Separately together.’

‘Umm…what the hell is going on?’ Asked Emily. ‘And what is the whole thing with my medallion?’

‘It’s a rare Japanese *Butsudan* Ancestral Receptacle,’ answered Merlin.

‘Rare,’ snorted the Prof. ‘It’s bloody unique. I’ve heard of them but never seen the like.’

Emily shook her head. ‘Sorry, means nothing.’

‘It’s like a repository for the spirits of your ancestors. Well, not their spirits as such but their residual power left in this plane. Basically put, I suppose one could call it a guardian angel of sorts. It protects you from harm. However, this one has never been merged.’

‘And what would that mean?’ Asked Em as she became more and more confused.

‘Activated,’ explained the Prof. ‘For a receptacle to work correctly it needs to be merged or bonded to the person that is wearing it. For this one to have achieved what it has without merging is remarkable.’

‘So can you activate it?’ She asked Merlin.

The old magician nodded but at the same time he looked doubtful.

‘You’re not sure, are you?’ Said Em.

‘Oh, I am sure,’ assured Merlin. ‘I can do it. It’s a simple awakening

spell…'

'But?'

No one spoke.

Finally the Prof blurted out a response. 'It's very painful.'

'I can take it,' said Em.

'Very, very, very painful,' continued the Prof.

'Just do it,' snapped Emily.

Merlin shook his head. 'It may kill you. We're talking pain that it quite literally off the scale as far as human capacity is concerned.'

Emily lay down on her bed. 'This stupid *Potestatum* is going to kill me or one of my friends at any rate. I can't function with the way that it's changing me. If the medallion stops that then I have no option. Just do it. Now before I change my mind.'

Merlin nodded and raised his hands, arms open wide. For several minutes nothing happened. Then a roiling ball of red flame coalesced between his arms. It writhed and boiled for a few seconds and then, with a clap as loud as thunder, it leapt at Emily, striking her in the chest and covering her body in ethereal flame.

She stiffened with the shock as the pain rendering her absolutely immobile.

And outside the Pack started to howl in sympathy.

Tag came running through the door followed closely by William and Troy, both of whom were part transformed into their Wolfman modes.

'What's happening?' Demanded William, his voice a guttural growl as it issued from his extended jaws.

'Don't panic,' urged Merlin. 'It's for her own good. An awakening spell. It should reduce the negative effects of the *Potestatum*.'

Both William and Troy were shaking with emotion and it took Merlin a few seconds to realize that they were both in extreme pain.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I should have known. The link that the Pack has with her. You're feeling part of the pain.'

'No shit,' grunted Troy. 'If she's feeling this I feel sorry for her.'

The Prof shook his head. 'She's not feeling what you are.'

'Good,' said Troy.

'Oh no,' continued the Prof. 'I would say that the level of pain that is coursing through Emily's body right now exceeds your pain by a level of magnitude. Perhaps even a hundred times more.'

'No,' screamed Troy. 'It'll kill her. No one can take that much pain.'

'She has to,' stated Merlin.

'Not alone,' snapped Troy. He knelt down beside her and put his arms about her rigid body. Then he forced himself to merge with her. Like he did when they communicated. At the same time he called for the Pack.

'Yes,' said William. 'Good idea.' He to sat next to Troy and placed his

hands on Emily, joining his Omega mind with them all, coalescing them into one single entity.

Then he spread the pain, handing it out equally to all the Pack. Drenching them in absolute agony. Drowning them in a sea of suffering.

The day turned to night and back to day.

With the rising of the sun Emily's eyes opened, and she sat up.

Their baptism of fire had ended.

***

Two of the wolves died that night. Overcome by the pain that they had endured. Others could not move for days, broken and twisted. Their minds blank. Their bodies unable to respond as they slowly recovered.

Emily walked amongst them. Laying hands. Communing. Her guilt overshadowed only by her love of the Pack. They had taken her pain and assimilated it. They had quite literally died for her.

Taken away on spears of fire.

They were her, and she was them.

She was now not only The Daywalker, she was truly Pack, And she could feel the Wolf inside her, ready to show itself. Ready to live. Ready to fight.

She was Daywalker, Wolf and Guardian.

She was Emily Shadowhunter.

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Chapter 16

Kenneth, Bernard and Beulah. All three names had proven to be very popular around the turn of the last century when the three of them had been born. All in London and all within a few years of one another. None of them had actually fought in the First World War, all being between ten and fourteen years of age at the time. However, they remembered the Great War well. As did they the Second one. They hadn't fought in that one either, even though they had all been of an age to enlist.

By then they had all been turned and, quite frankly, couldn't have given a toss as to whether the Nazis or the Allies won the war. After all, who bothers which herd of cattle was morally superior? One tends not to care much about the politics of their food.

The sun had just set, and they had exited the darkened limousine driven by a familiar. It had been many years since they had last visited London. Back in the swinging sixties, in fact. But since then the old *Capo* had decreed that the *Nosferatu* pull back into the shadows. Feeding was done in licensed clubs. Bodies were disposed of and the entire thing became sanitized. Controlled.

So the three friends had hunted far and wide instead. Secluded hamlets. The fringes of rock festivals. The homeless and itinerant. Because to them, as to many of the younger *Nosferatu*, the hunt was almost as important as the feed.

But now there was a new sheriff in town. Nathan Tremblay was the *Capo*, and he had cried havoc and let slip the children of the night. *'Hunt,'* he had told them. *'Own the night.'*

And so, for the first time in many years, they had come to London.

But before they fed, they decided to take a tour.

'I was fourteen when the first Zeppelins came over,' said Kenneth, pointing east. 'I was living in Whitehall at the time. Elsie and Samuel both died that night. They were twins. Only three years old.'

Bernard nodded. 'They were impressive, weren't they,' he added. 'Those massive air-ships rumbling through the night skies, dropping fire and death.'

'Never actually saw one,' admitted Beulah. 'I was only three at the time. But I remember the blitz during the Second World War. I was part of the Brotherhood by then.'

‘Me too,’ concurred both of the male vamps.

‘Good times,’ grinned Beulah. ‘Absolute mayhem. You could kill at will. Feed whenever you wanted. No one was going to notice an exsanguinated body amongst all of that death.’

‘The sixties weren’t that bad either,’ said Bernard. ‘Free love, endless supply of drugs. People went missing all the time and the cops were crap. No DNA tests combined with rubbish procedural work. I mean, if you killed a vagrant or a prostitute or a druggy, the coppers didn’t even bother to look into it. Open and shut case. They’d call it “Death by Misadventure” or such-what.’

‘But that was pretty much the end of the lollipop,’ commented Beulah. ‘That’s when the *Capo* instituted the feeding clubs. Banned street hunting. Turned us into weak reflections of ourselves.’

‘And what was with the ban on Chinatown?’ Asked Kenneth. ‘I mean, why did they get a free pass?’

Beulah shook her head. ‘Not sure and never asked. Well, actually I did ask a few times back in the day but the elders just stared at me and didn’t answerer. Some shook their heads and mumbled a few choice insults so I stopped asking. All I know is that ever since there has been a Chinatown, back in the early 1900’s the *Nosferatu* have been forbidden to even cross the threshold, let alone feed there.’

‘Well that edict no longer stands,’ said Kenneth with a grin. ‘So tonight we all go for a bit of Chinese.’

Bernard laughed but Beulah looked a little pensive.

‘What’s the problem, Beulah?’ Asked Kenneth.

She shook her head. ‘Nothing. I mean, the new *Capo* hasn’t actually revoked the rule.’

‘True,’ admitted Kenneth. ‘But he did say, feed where you want and do as you will. And I want some Chinese and I will get some.’

Beulah nodded, convinced. ‘Right,’ she said. ‘Let’s do it.’

So the three bloodsuckers headed for Chinatown. For it was a brave new world and they were at the very cutting edge.

They entered Chinatown from the SOHO side, climbing over a wall that brought them into an area behind a row of restaurants, figuring that they would take one of the chefs or busboys when they came out the back for a break.

No sooner had they touched the ground when one of the doors opened.

A figure stood in the doorway for a few seconds. Silhouetted against the harsh white light in the interior of the building.

And then an ancient lady walked out.

She wore a floor length iridescent silk robe that shone and glittered like the scales of a fresh-caught fish. Her gray hair was fashioned into a thick plait that hung down her back to below her knees and her face

was a mass of wrinkles and lines. Small nose, almost no lips.

Her eyes shone in the darkness. Deepest jade. Youthful, despite her obvious age. No, not youthful. Timeless.

The three vampires hissed and spat. Beulah laughed, giddy with anticipation.

But the Chinese woman did not flinch. She simply stared at them, her face calm, her demeanor one of mild irritation rather than the anticipated fear.

'Why are you here, young children of the night?' She asked.

'Because we want to be,' snapped Beulah.

The ancient shook her head. 'It is forbidden. We have long had a truce with the *Jiangshi*, the vampires.'

'No,' said Kenneth. 'You are mistaken. There are no more truces with the *Nosferatu*. There is no more forbidden to the *Nosferatu*. We are to take our rightful place at the top of the pyramid. We go where we want and do as we please.'

'It is you who are mistaken, child,' informed the old woman. 'Leave now and we shall speak no more of this. You are young. Crass. But in time you may find wisdom. However, if you do not leave most precipitously, then you will find nothing except for the true death.'

The three vamps laughed in genuine amusement.

'I was going to let you live, crone,' said Kenneth. 'Being the dried out old husk that you are, hardly seems worth the effort of feeding on you. But now because of your insolence, I'll give you a go.'

The bloodsuckers moved forward, fangs extending as they did so.

But as they moved, the women collapsed. Seemingly melting as she did so. Her robes pooling on the floor like oil. Or blood.

And then the puddle coalesced, writhing and twisting as it did so. Rising higher and higher. Not quite a snake. Not quite a lizard. And then it was there. Fully forty feet long, standing ten feet high. More than half of the body was a tail. Ten feet behind its massive scaled head stood two wings. Smoke rose from its nostrils and small tongues of flame flickered at the back of its open mouth.

The vamps stopped in their tracks. Absolutely astounded.

'Shit,' whispered Bernard. 'It's a dragon.'

The dragon tilted its head to one side, opened its mouth and unleashed a storm of blue-white fire.

Seconds later all that was left of the errant *Nosferatu* were three slightly oily spots on the ground.

The old lady sighed and walked back into the restaurant. There were people that she needed to call and she knew that it would be a long night. Not that she minded long nights. After all, she had not slept for over one thousand years and there was no way that she was going to start doing so now.

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Chapter 17

As the new *Capo* of the *Nosferatu*, Nathan had access to all manner of arcane knowledge. Spells, ancient tomes and the collective mind-power of countless thousands of years experience.
He could have called on all of this.

Instead, however, he had simply used the internet. A few clicks on the City of London Police website and he knew the name of the Commander of Operations, Organized Crime Unit, as well as his office hours and extended itinerary. Commander Daniel Woolford.

He printed out a photograph and a copy of his itinerary, called two Bloodwraiths, James and Carter, handed them the info and told them to take a couple of assistants, stake out the office that night and when the commander left, kidnap him and bring him to the chapterhouse. There was no problem regarding sunlight as the commander worked extremely long hours so they could grab him well after the sun went down.

The plan worked perfectly…up to a point.

At just after ten that evening, commander Woolford left the police headquarters with three colleagues. James approached him and informed the policeman that he should accompany them and to do so quietly to avoid any trouble.

Woolford smiled. ‘Really?’ He asked. ‘Why, what seems to be the problem?’

‘No problem, commander,’ informed James. ‘Simply put, my leader wants to see you. Have a chat. He has sent me to collect you and so here I am.’

Woolford laughed again. ‘Sorry, no can do. Tell your governor to make an appointment like everyone else. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going home.’

James put his hand on the commander’s chest, stopping any forward movement. ‘You will come with us, sir. We can do this the easy way, or the hard way. It’s up to you.’

‘Well then,’ said Woolford. ‘I choose the hard way. But before you continue with this farce, let me warn you, these three gentlemen who are accompanying me are the top three unarmed-combat instructors in the police force. As luck would have it, they were here for a meeting with me.’ Woolford chuckled. ‘Now isn’t that just the worst luck for you? Looks like you picked the most inopportune time for a kidnap

attempt.' He gestured towards the men who stepped forward. 'Chaps, get rid of these idiots, thank you.'

James raised an eyebrow. 'Last chance, commander.'

'Oh sod off,' retorted Woolford.

The three combat experts advanced. Moving steadily, on their balls of their feet. Alert but relaxed.

James didn't stir. But Carter blurred into movement, striking so fast that the breaking of bones sounded like a giant woodpecker hammering away at an Oak tree.

Two seconds later the three combat experts lay on the floor. Blood pooled beneath their dead bodies like spilled engine oil. Slow, dark and viscous. Their heads all faced the wrong way, limbs stuck out at impossible angles and rib bones poked through their clothing like dry twigs sticking up from newly tilled soil.

'I warned you,' whispered James. He cocked his fist and snapped a short sharp punch at the commander's nose.

And the last thing that Woolford registered before he blacked out was the sickening sound of his own nose shattering.

James turned to the other two vampires that he had brought along to assist. 'Clear up. Leave no evidence that we were here. See if you can force those bodies in the trunk. Come on, let's move.'

***

Black.

Gray.

Consciousness returning.

He was sitting on a chair. Wooden. Steel. Utilitarian.

He tried to move his arms. Duct tape around his wrists and his ankles. Strapped to the chair.

He looked up. In front of him stood a young man. He wore dark maroon leather trousers, soft black boots. He was shirtless and his upper body looked uncannily like an anatomy chart showing the muscular system. Every detail and striation standing out in stark relief under skin that was so pale as to be corpse-like.

The man snapped his fingers, and a female walked over and held a glass of water to the commander's lips.

Woolford drank greedily, frantic for liquid, desperately trying to get as much down as he could before she took the glass away. But the female let him have his fill, only removing the glass when it was empty.

'My name is Nathan Tremblay,' said the anatomical chart man. 'Obviously I know who you are so please refrain from the whole, do you know who I am, you're in big trouble sort of thing. It's tedious and inaccurate. Now, I am going to keep things simple. I need a

complete rundown of all the criminal gangs in the London area. Names of members, addresses, hangouts, what they do, when they do it. Everything. Do you understand?'

Woolford shook his head. 'No. What are you? Who were those men that took me? How, in God's name, did they move so fast?'

'Irrelevant,' snapped Nathan. 'Now, what do you need to fulfill my request? Pen and paper, or would you prefer a computer?'

'Neither,' said the commander. 'Because I am not giving you one piece of information. Who the hell do you think that you are? I am the commander of operations for the London police. I demand that you let me go this instant.'

Nathan smiled. He could glamor the commander into obeying him but that sometimes resulted in false information as the human that had been glamoured did everything that he could to make Nathan happy. Even lie. No, information was always best when garnered the old fashioned way. Through either reward or punishment. And punishment was so much more fun.

The new *Capo* put his face close to the commander's and pulled his lips back, allowing his fangs to grow. Then he extended his talons and held them in front of Woodford's eyes, so close that they were almost out of focus.

'I seriously advise you to cooperate, mister Woolford,' whispered Nathan. 'To resort to mixed metaphor, you are extremely out of your depth and I think that your ability to tread water would be vastly impaired if I used these talons to pluck your eyes out.' Nathan leaned yet closer and his tongue flickered out, licking the commander's neck. Lingering on his jugular. 'Or perhaps I shall simply tear your throat open and feed on you.'

Woolford looked into Nathan's blood-red eyes and all that he saw was the Abyss…looking back at him.

'If you give me access to a computer, I can print off everything that you need.'

Nathan stepped back and bowed.

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Chapter 18

Nathan sat in a leather wingback chair. In his hands were the printed pages that the commander had given him regarding the various organized crime gangs and families in London and surrounds.

The new *Capo* had his feet up. Resting on the cooling corpse of Daniel Woolford, Commander in Chief, London Police, Organized Crime Unit. As soon as the commander had reached the end of his usefulness, he had been relegated to the level of food. And furniture.

Nathan was pleased with what he was reading. The notes were organized, succinct and to the point. In fact, he saw no reason why he shouldn't start his campaign that very night. There were still quite a few hours until sunrise and the sooner the better.

He decided that he would start low down on the ladder, take a short time to familiarize himself with the streets. He took his five Nightwalkers with him and got one of the familiars to drive them to Piccadilly Circus. They alighted under the statue of Anteros and then simply walked the streets for a while.

'We're looking for bottom-feeders,' instructed Nathan. 'Split up. Use your superior eyesight, hearing, whatever. I want pickpockets, pimps, prostitutes, muggers.' He glanced around the area and then pointed. 'You find someone and then you bring them to me. I'll be in a small alleyway off Babmaster Place. There, down Jermyn Street. No one ever goes there. It'll be a good place to question people. Right. Do it.'

Nathan walked off, leaving his bodyguards to carry out their mission.

Ten minutes later three of them had already found him, each dragging a petrified person with the, Two men and one woman, obviously a prostitute. The Nightwalkers lined them up in front of Nathan, at the end of the dark alleyway. The *Capo* stared at them for a few seconds before he pointed at the first male. 'What was he doing?'

'Pickpocket, *Capo*,' answered Greg, one of the Nightwalkers. 'Good at it. Saw him get a watch off a guy's wrist without the guy noticing.'

Nathan nodded. 'And this one?'

'Attempted mugging. Behind Wittards. Used a knife to hold up a couple of tourists.'

'What the hell?' Questioned the mugger. 'You dudes cops, or what?'

Nathan smiled, allowing his fangs to show. 'I'd say that we fit more into the "or what" category,' he said.

The mugger shrank back in fear at the sight of Nathan's oversized canines.

'Do you work alone or are you freelance?' Enquired Nathan.

'Why?'

'I asked politely,' continued Nathan. 'The next time that you answer one of my questions with one of your own I am going to damage you rather badly. Do you understand?'

The man nodded.

'Now, do you work alone?'

'I work alone but I pay homage to Mister Stopes.'

'Homage?'

'Yeah. Half of what I takes I give to Mister Stopes.'

'I see,' murmured Nathan. 'What if you don't give him half? How would he know?'

The mugger shrugged. 'You obviously don't know Mister Stopes. I wouldn't dare. He would know. Somehow he always does.'

'Interesting,' said Nathan. 'His name was in the commander's report but not his address. Where could I find this Mister Stopes?'

'Dunno,' admitted the mugger. 'I gives my homage to his man, Ben. Big Ben, they call him.'

'Where and when does this happen?'

'Community Sports Center in King's Cross. Every Wednesday and Saturday night. Six thirty of the PM. Please, mister. Don't tell him I grassed him up. He'll hurt me real bad.'

'Don't worry about that,' reassured Nathan.

'Thanks, mister.'

'You see,' continued the *Capo*. 'You can't hurt the dead.' And with a flash of movement he snapped the mugger's neck.

Both the prostitute and the pickpocket gasped in shock. But their gasps turned to shrieks of terror when Nathan lunged forward and tore open the mugger's neck, drinking greedily as he did so.

Nathan looked up from his snack, his lips coated with blood. 'Shut up,' he commanded.

Both of the minor criminals stopped their shrieking. The pickpocket went silent, and the prostitute whimpered softly.

Nathan pointed at the pickpocket. 'Mister Stopes?'

The criminal shook his head. 'I've heard of him but I don't make enough to show up on his radar.'

'Fine,' said Nathan. 'You can go.'

'Really? Thanks.'

Nathan laughed. 'Joking.' He gestured to Greg who leaned over and broke the pickpocket's neck with an audible snap.

Then Nathan looked up to see a group of six men coming down the alleyway towards them.

‘Hey,’ shouted the one. ‘What you doing with Darlene?’

Nathan looked at the prostitute and raised an eyebrow. ‘You Darlene?’

She nodded.

‘Go away,’ said Nathan to the six men. ‘I’m busy.’

The man who had shouted his question shook his head. ‘Listen, posh boy,’ he said as he drew a revolver. ‘You obviously have no idea who I am. Now, if you and your toffy little mates are polite, then I might let you live. If not, well who knows?’

The prostitute shook her head. ‘Parkinson,’ she bleated. ‘Don’t do this.’

‘Shut up, bitch,’ he yelled. ‘I tell you what to do, you don’t tell me. Now,’ he continued as he pointed the gun at Nathan. ‘On your knees.’

Nathan shook his head. ‘No,’ he replied, a slight grin on his face. ‘I think that you had better shoot me.’

Parkinson waved the revolver. ‘I’m being serious. On your knees or I will shoot you.’

‘I’m also being serious,’ said Nathan.

‘Should I kill them all, *Capo*?’ Asked Greg.

‘No,’ replied Nathan. ‘I’m having fun. And it happens so rarely now I wouldn’t want to ruin it.’

‘I’m going to be doing the killing here, not you,’ yelled Parkinson. ‘What, are you mental?’

Nathan shrugged. ‘Perhaps. How can one ever be sure? Now, it’s your turn. Time to shoot me because I’m definitely not kneeling for the likes of you.’

Parkinson gritted his teeth and then, with a final wordless scream, he pulled the trigger.

The .38 special round hit Nathan in the center of his chest and exited between his shoulder blades in a gout of blood. The vampire looked down and shook his head. ‘Damn,’ he said. ‘I should have taken my shirt off first. Now it’s ruined.’

The shirt was indeed covered in blood but most of it was from the dead mugger. However, there was no sign of a wound on Nathan’s chest as his phenomenal metabolism had already healed him.

Parkinson did a double take and then fired again, pulling the trigger until it clicked down on an empty chamber.

Nathan smiled. ‘My turn.’ He jumped forward, ripped Parkinson’s right arm from its socket and hit him on the head with it, striking hard enough to crush his skull.

‘Always wanted to do that,’ he commented.

Parkinson’s dead body hit the floor and, as he did, his associates turned and ran.

Nathan gestured towards them and two of his Bloodwraiths blurred

in front of them and herded them back with ease.

'Now,' said Nathan. 'Who do you reprobates work for?'

The group avoided eye contact and shuffled their feet. No one wanted to draw attention to themselves lest it be terminal.

Finally one spoke 'We pay tribute to Mister Stopes, sir. So I suppose that we work for him.'

Nathan shook his head. 'No. From this day forth you work for me. And you shall refer to me as, *Capo*. Are we clear?'

They nodded.

'Yes, *Capo*.'

***

The next night was conducted in the same vein as the previous one. Nathan and his Nightwalkers combed the streets and educated. Some miscreants were killed as examples; others were set free after they had sworn allegiance to the *Capo*.

By the end of the third night the *Nosferatu* had killed over twenty people and converted a similar number to their fold.

And when they went visiting on the fourth night, the word on the street was well out. Allegiance was sworn the moment that any of the Nightwalkers accosted someone and Nathan only had to kill one person.

But in all fairness that was a tourist, and he was hungry.

Now that the word was out it was time for Nathan to start talking to the upper echelons of the crime world. He would wait a couple of days and then it would be he would go a visiting, and he would teach them why they should be afraid of the night.

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Chapter 19

Insanity had been visited on London.

Dead bodies littered the streets and, worst of all, the Chief in charge of the whole thing had gone missing, probably kidnapped. As had three unarmed combat experts that had been with him at the time. The current theory was that the three combat specialists had gone rogue and taken the Chief. But so far there had been no contact. No ransom notes. Nothing.

Now the biggest gang war ever was taking place in and around the center of London's tourist area and the responsibility for sorting it out had fallen to a combined task force consisting of the London Police under temporary assistant commissioner Ian Clark and Jack Jackson, chief superintendent, Scotland Yard. Strictly speaking, Commissioner Clark outranked chief superintendent Jackson but Scotland Yard was famous for never considering themselves to be outranked by anyone.

So, at the moment, the joint task force was more like two separate task forces attempting to pull rank over each other while at the same time ensuring that their team got more access to the crime sites and spent more time in front of the relevant media.

In other words, it was the usual government circus in that more time was spent ass-covering than actually investigating.

Chief Super, Jackson, stood outside the crime scene tent and wondered if it would be inappropriate to light up a cigarette. Strictly speaking he had given up yesterday. But then he had given up the week before that. And the week prior to that week. So he had established that giving up was easy…sticking to it was difficult.

One of the forensic scientists exited the tent. He looked like a budget Teletubby, pale yellow onesy, paper booties, hood, mask, gloves. He walked over to the chief super. 'Jack,' he greeted.

The chief nodded. 'Simon. What gives?'

'Not good, I'm afraid. Nothing makes sense.'

'Well then, tell me what you can,' urged Jackson.

'Fine, but don't quote me on this. Not yet at any rate. I need more time to think. Firstly, it's not a single perpetrator, so no maniac serial killer. It's quite obviously a group or gang. Now, this is where it gets weird. Some of the injuries are consistent with massive trauma from a blunt object. If I didn't know any better, I would swear that some of the deceased were struck with a fist, but that's impossible.'

‘Why?’

Simon shook his head. ‘The strength of the blow. No human being could ever strike anything that hard. They would shatter their own bones as well as the victims. So I must assume that they were struck by some sort of mechanically driven, fist shaped weapon. Like a steam hammer. Now, secondly, some of the victims were savaged by an animal of some sort. Not sure what. Not a dog, more like a really large rat.’

‘How large?’ Asked Jackson.

Simon took a deep breath. ‘The size of a person.’

‘Oh come on, Simon. Get serious.’

‘I am. That’s why I said not to quote me yet. But there’s more, two of the victims have been almost totally exsanguinated.’

‘English, Simon. What does that mean?’

‘They had no blood left in them,’ answered the forensic scientist. ‘It had been removed.’

‘How?’

Simon shook his head. ‘If I had to say, I would venture that it had been sucked out by the giant rat.’

Jackson snorted in disgust. ‘Good lord, Simon, I beg you not to tell anyone else these ludicrous theories of yours. Man alive, the Yard would become the laughingstock of the force.’

‘Hey, I can only tell you what the evidence shows,’ retorted Simon.

‘Fair enough. Keep working on it. Meanwhile, what the hell am I going to tell the press?’

‘Tell them it’s a turf war. Russian mobsters moving in on the local crime families. Ritual killings sort of thing.’

Jackson nodded. ‘It’s not great, but it beats “Giant Rat Sucks Tourist Dry”. Thanks, Simon. We’ll talk again later.’

***

The tall young man stood alone in the crowd. A light rain misted the air, and the alleyway was bathed in shadow. It was almost sundown. When the man moved forward to get a better look, the crowd parted before him, leaving an area of open space wherever he walked. Like a shark swimming through a school of bait-fish.

He noted the crime scene tents, the scores of forensic scientists and the many uniformed officers. He sniffed the air. But there was no sign of *them*. The rain had washed away their scent. He left the crowd and walked swiftly north, to the backstreets of SOHO and surrounds. As he walked the sun sank below the horizon and true night fell. Minutes later he heard the fluttering of a cloak and a series of soft footsteps behind him.

‘Sylvian,’ he greeted the newcomer.

‘Troy,’ the man returned the greeting. ‘Anything?’

The young werewolf shook his head. ‘Not at street level. Maybe now that the sun is down. But I would be able to smell them on their familiars. Not even a hint. There are no vamps or familiars here.’

‘Let’s go high,’ suggested the Bloodborn.

‘May as well,’ conceded Troy. ‘There’s nothing happening at street level.’

They both cast quick glances around to ensure that no one could see them and then they literally scampered up the side of the nearest building, making the roof in mere seconds.

The two of them ran from rooftop to rooftop, covering the whole of the SOHO area and then moving on to Covent Garden. Sometimes they used the streets but mainly they traveled above them, moving with an ease that would have turned any professional Parkour runner green with a case of terminal envy. However, they eschewed the fancy forms. Not for them they dissipated energy of Kong Vaults, Safety Taps and Tic Tacs. They simply went from one place to another place as quickly as possible. Sixty foot gaps between buildings were jumped with ease and twenty foot high walls scaled with a single leap. Every move at least doubling and sometimes tripling the current Olympic long jump and high jump records. Let alone the fact that both were running at a speed that would have left Usain Bolt stumbling along at the rear like a toddler with his legs tied together.

After an hour of searching Troy stopped and held up his hand. ‘No sign of them. What about you?’ He asked the Bloodborn.

Sylvian shook his head. ‘Can’t feel anything. They must be taking the night off.’

‘I agree,’ confirmed Troy. ‘But why? And what is going on? Why the sudden rash of murders? Every night for three nights and then stop? This is not good, I feel like we are running from behind on this one. And let’s face it; the fact of the matter is that if the gargoyle guardians don’t see them, then there is little chance that we can intervene. We’ll have to talk to William. This sort of open murder has never happened before; normally the bloodsuckers are a little more discreet. Let’s head back to the house and talk to the Omega.’

***

Troy and Sylvian stood in the kitchen while Tag made a pot of tea and Emily fried a few rare steaks for the young werewolf and the Bloodborn. The two of them had gone through the comings and goings in London and now both William and Merlin were sitting quietly and thinking.

As Tag poured the tea, there was a shimmer of blue light in the room and the Morrigan appeared, morphing from crow to beautiful women

as she did so.

'Where the hell have you been?' Enquired Merlin snappily.

The Morrigan shrugged, which did all sorts of interesting things to the front of her tight dress.

'Hoo, mama,' said Tag with feeling. 'That be some fine looking body language you expressing there, miss Morrigan.'

The goddess smiled. 'Why, thank you, Tag. As for you, Merlin,' she continued. 'I have been here, there. Nowhere, everywhere. Why? Are you now my keeper?'

'I called for you,' said Merlin. 'Needed advice.'

'I know,' admitted the goddess. 'I heard. But I am not at your beck and call, Merlin, however important you may think that you are.'

'Pah!' Exclaimed the magician. 'You come when you are not needed and hide when you are.'

The Morrigan smiled again. 'Come, come now, my dear,' she said. 'Be nice. Anyhow, I come with news. Not good news, I hasten to say, but news none-the-less.'

'Well, spit it out, woman,' snapped Merlin. 'Before it becomes so out of date that its worth is nullified.'

'Word amongst the gods is that your Nathan Tremblay has deposed the old *Capo* and is now the new leader of the *Nosferatu*. Apparently he has decided that the brethren will now take their rightful place at the top of the food-chain and, as such, he has advocated a more aggressive stance. It seems as if he has adopted the Law of Thelema for his followers.'

'The Law of Thelema?' Asked Troy.

'The Law of Thelema was developed in the early 1900s by Aleister Crowley, an English writer and magician,' answered Merlin. 'Met him a couple of times, complete loon. Anyway, he said, *Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law.* Great way to start total anarchy.'

'So you think that this spate of killings in London could be Nathan's way of making his mark?' Asked William.

'Nor sure,' admitted Merlin. 'Seems pretty random. Kill a few street thugs and a tourist and then stop. Must be some sort of plan, we just aren't seeing it.'

'There's more,' said the Morrigan.

'What?'

She grinned. 'Seems as though our young Capo failed to mention to his brethren that his *Do as thou will thing* didn't stretch to cover Chinatown. In all fairness, he probably didn't even know about the treaty. Word is that three of his brethren ventured into Chinatown in an attempt to feed. Ended up being barbequed.'

Merlin shook his head. 'Idiots. I hadn't heard. They must have run into *Tengshe.* What were they thinking? Maybe this is a good thing,'

continued Merlin. ‘Maybe this time the Chinese will help us in our fight.’

The Morrigan shook her head. ‘No way. There are so few dragons left. They will protect their own, no more, no less. And now my news has been delivered I shall leave.’ She bowed to all, shimmered into her crow guise and disappeared.

Everyone started talking at once, discussing Nathan and his new position and arguing as to what he might be planning.

‘Look, one thing is for certain,’ said William. ‘Nathan is not going to stop now. It sounds as if he has declared open season on humans and there is no way that we will be able to keep on this. Not by ourselves at any rate. I think that we shall need help.’

‘From who?’ Asked Troy.

‘I know many people,’ answered William. ‘And it’s time to visit a couple of them and get real.’

While the Omega was talking, Merlin stood up and left, headed for the Prof’s room. He opened the door, walked in and nodded his greeting.

‘Just had a visitor,’ he informed the Prof. ‘And there’s something that we need to talk about. It’s the Morrigan. I think that we might have a problem.’

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Chapter 20

William looked out of the window at the iconic revolving sign below. New Scotland Yard. He had gone over the speech in his mind many times but whatever way that he said it…well, it sounded insane.

So he has made his appointment with his old friend, Sir Jasper, Met Police Commissioner and head of Scotland Yard, taken Emily with him and then simply came out with it.

The dialog had not gone down well.

Sir Jasper tapped his pen on the desk, his usually expressionless face set in a deep frown. ‘Quite frankly, William,’ he said. ‘I have no idea how to react. If this is a joke of some sort, then it is in very poor taste. God knows that I don’t see enough of you but to take my time up with some nonsensical story about witches and vampires and werewolves is discourteous in the extreme. I might assume that this was part of some elaborate joke, apart from the fact that it’s not even vaguely funny.’ He shook his head. ‘I mean, if you’re in some sort of trouble then out with it. We’ve been friends long enough that you can come clean. Whatever it is, I shall do my best to help.’

William turned from the window. ‘Werewolves and vampires,’ he said. ‘I made no mention of witches, Jasper.’

‘Makes no difference,’ snapped the chief. ‘It’s all bloody Harry Potter nonsense and you know it. Gangs of blood sucking fiends roaming the streets of London, packs of werewolves fighting against them. Everybody knows that there is no such thing as a vampire let alone a human being that changes into a wolf. It’s beyond ludicrous.’

‘You’ll have to show him,’ said Emily.

‘Show me what?’ Asked Jasper.

‘I was trying to avoid that, if at all possible.’

‘Avoid what,’ asked Jasper again. ‘Stop being so cryptic.’

‘Let’s face it,’ said Em. ‘The time has come. I think that it’s the only way to convince him.’

William nodded and then started to strip, removing his shirt first and then his boots. As he started to unbuckle his belt, Jasper stood up. ‘What the bloody hell are you doing? Stop it. Good God, man. This is the headquarters of Scotland Yard, not some sort of strip joint. Put your clothes back on this instant.’

Sir Jasper shot out of his seat and strode towards William.

‘Stop,’ commanded Emily as she brought the power of her coercion

into play.

The Chief jerked to a halt immediately as his need to obey overcame his desire to stop his friend stripping off in his office.

'Go back,' instructed Em.

Jasper lurched back to his seat like a marionette, his face a picture of strain as he vainly attempted to resist the overwhelming power of Em's compulsion.

'Sit.'

Like an errant dog the chief of Scotland Yard slammed back down into his chair.

'Now stay still and watch,' finished Emily.

Jasper stared at William, his face set, his eyes wide open and unblinking.

And William changed, morphing slowly into a wolf the size of a horse. Teeth like sabers, muscles like slabs of concrete and eyes that looked into your very soul.

Then he growled.

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The chief's trembling hand spilled some of his tea into his saucer as he tried to convey some of the liquid to his mouth.

After another attempt he simply gave up and replaced the cup and saucer on his desk. 'How long?' He asked. 'I mean, how long have you been afflicted?'

William smiled. 'Some would object to you using the word affliction. But in answer to your question, many hundreds of years.'

'Good lord. Both World Wars?'

William nodded. 'One and Two. Agincourt and the hundred year war. The crusades, both Boer wars. Actually, looking back over time it seems that mostly mankind has simply been kicking the crap out of themselves.' He shook his head sadly. 'What a stupid race we are.'

'And you?' Enquired the chief of Emily. 'It was you that turned me into a puppet, was it?'

Emily nodded. 'Sorry about that but we needed you to see.'

'Oh I saw, alright,' concurred Jasper. 'And a right scary thing it was. But not as terrifying as what you did. You took away all my free will. If you had told me to pour gasoline over myself and light it, I would have obeyed. Bloody painful as well. Like someone was trying to smash my brain out of my head with a hammer. Still, needs must, I suppose. No harm done.' He turned back to William. 'What do you suggest that we do now? I mean, we can't exactly wheel you in to parliament and have your scare the bejesus out of everyone, simply wouldn't do us any good. Half of that lot have got dodgy tickers to start with. You'd probably end up killing most of them and the other

half would simply refuse to believe what they'd seen. They'd call it mass hypnosis or some such rubbish. Bloody politicians. I suppose that we could get the PM involved but I'd rather not. She'd listen but then she'd simply spend half a day talking at me and by the end she'd have said nothing and we'd be back at square one.'

'We cannot tell the truth,' said Williams. 'Obviously. What we need to do is think of a way to prepare the public and the police force for what seems to be happening and then take it from there.'

'A cover up, you mean?' Questioned Jasper.

William nodded.

'No problem. Us Brits are top notch at that sort of thing. We'll put it about that a bunch of foreigners, probably Russian or Ukrainian, have come over here illegally and are engaged in some sort of turf war. Old Eastern European gang custom that involves the ritual killing of your foe. Vlad the Impaler type of thing. I'll make sure that we find enough evidence to support the facts. You know, tattoos, pendants with bat wings on, that sort of crap. Actually, I'll also get some trusted chaps from MI5 and MI6 onto this. Spooks are good at this disinformation game. They'll fit right in. Won't even need to tell them the truth, simply tell them what end result I want and Bob's your uncle.'

'Good,' affirmed William. 'Look, we should have more info for you in the very near future. I'm sure that this isn't simply some random increase in public killing just because Nathan wants to flex a few muscles. No, there's more to this and until we know exactly what it is, we're still whistling in the dark. However, let's do what we can to ready the troops.' He stood up and held out his hand. The chief stood and shook it. 'Thanks awfully, Jasper, old chum,' said William. 'And sorry about the whole, wolf thing.'

'No worries,' asserted the chief. 'Anyway, as I said, the worst part of the ordeal was the mind control thingy that your girl did. Most disconcerting.'

'Well, she's not, my girl, as you put it, but glad there's no hard feelings.'

Jasper shook Emily's hand and then watched as the two of them left the building.

Moments later he was on the phone to someone he knew in MI5.

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'Most of the victims were criminals,' noted Troy.

'So?' Shrugged Emily. 'London is full of criminals.'

'No,' denied Troy. 'Not like, ninety percent of Londoners and tourists. But pretty much ninety percent of the dead had form. Mugging, GBH, larceny. That can't be a coincidence.'

'True,' admitted Em. 'So what are you saying?'

‘Obviously Nathan hasn’t decided to become a force for good and he’s sending his *Nosferatu* out into the streets to defend the innocent and kill the evil. Like some sort of Spiderman on steroids.’

‘Well, obviously,’ concurred Em. ‘Because he killed a couple of innocents and snacked on them.’

‘So what the hell are they doing?’

‘They’re taking over,’ said Tag.

‘What?’ Asked Troy and Em together.

‘Back in the day,’ answered Tag. ‘When I was still a drug dealer, if we wanted to take over a certain area then we would start by leaning on the soldiers. The low ranking dudes in that area. You control them first and then you move your way up. Starve the head for a while by cutting off the tail. Spread discourse and fear, make everything harder for the existing bosses to control. Then after you’ve softened them up, whittled away at their base for a while, you strike. Take out the head. Put yourself in charge.’

‘So you’re saying that Nathan is setting himself up to be the king of London’s criminal underworld?’ Confirmed Emily.

Tag nodded. ‘It’s a classic takeover bid. I reckon that he be starting with the higher-ups soon. Next couple of days or so. You’ll see, we’ll get news of some mid-level gangster type found torn to pieces. Or sucked dry like a prune.’

‘Maybe he’ll turn them.’ Added Troy.

‘No way,’ denied Tag. ‘Not at first. At first it all be about intimidation. Gaining fear and respect. He’ll kill a few more. Then he’ll consolidate with one gang and take out the others. He’d have to. There’s no way that he could control all the gangs. Even him. There be just too many thieves and cut throats and rapists that would want to take over. He’s gonna have to be real harsh to get them all to get in line.’

‘I think that you’re right,’ said Emily. ‘But why would he do it? I mean, the *Nosferatu* have countless wealth, so it’s not money.’

‘Power,’ said Troy. ‘He’s all about power. That’s why he turned. That’s why he does everything and anything. Control. Power.’

‘Maybe,’ conceded Em. ‘But I’m not one hundred percent convinced about that. He’s a schemer. Everything he does seems to have some ulterior motive. I suppose we’ll just have to wait and see.’

The kitchen door opened and William strode in. It had been two days since he and Em had visited Sir Jasper in London and the chief had asked to see William again that morning. The Omega had been at the Scotland Yard HQ for most of the day.

He placed a briefcase on the kitchen table.

‘Wassup, big wolf?’ Asked Tag.

William smiled. ‘Got a surprise for you, Tag,’ he said. ‘All of you,

actually.' He opened the briefcase and took out a wad of laminated cards. He flipped through them and passed one to the big man.

Tag looked at it and then his face spread into a massive grin. 'Is this for real, man?'

William nodded. 'Totally.'

Tag laughed out loud. 'I can' believe it. I'm a bloody superspy.'

He flipped the card over to Emily who picked it up and read it. About the size of a credit card. On the front a close up head and shoulders of Tag. On the top left the words MI7, a coat-of-arms and 'The Security Service'. Under that, a signature next to the words, 'Authorized Signature, Eliza Taylor, Director General MI5. At the very bottom of the card, 'By Order of Her Majesty The Queen' – *Regnum Defende*, In defense of the Realm.

William handed out some more of the cards. 'We are now all secret agents,' he informed them. 'The Pack as well. Even the Prof and Muller. We are classed as designation MI7 and are now subject to the Official Secrets Act of 1989 section C 6. Don't let it go to your heads, it's simply so that we can refuse to cooperate with the police if need be. If they question you and you need to get out, simply flash your card and tell them that you are acting in Defense of the Realm under her majesty's direct orders. That should do it.'

'Do I have a license to kill?' Asked Tag.

'Why? Would that make a difference?' Retorted William.

Tag thought for a few seconds and then shook his head. 'Suppose not, I tend to do it anyway. But still, this is awesome. Only a short while ago I was a dope dealer and now I'm friggin James Bond.'

William pushed the rest of the cards over to Troy. 'There, you're Alpha. Go tell your Pack.'

Troy nodded and left the room with the cards.

'Hey, agent Tag,' said William.

'Yes, boss.'

'How about you make us all some tea? Stirred, not shaken.'

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Chapter 21

The white Ford Transit van was parked on the sidewalk outside the front of the King's Cross Community Center. Two men sat in the front of the van. Both wore dark glasses despite the fact that the sun was down. The driver and extra muscle for just-in-case.

Next to the van stood a wiry teenager. Hood pulled up to cover his short hair, face awash with pimples and jeans that sat so low down on his hips that it was questionable whether it was a fashion statement or if he had simply lost his belt. His name was Jamie, and he was the official runner.

The side door of the van had been slid open in the back to reveal an interior that resembled a middle management office in an accounting firm. Solid wooden desk, beige carpets, wood paneling. A limited edition hunting print on the back wall. To the side a small drinks caddy and a filing cabinet.

Mister Stopes believed in giving the punters a bit of class. When you're taking their money, he would always say, at least ensure that they think that you're doing so with a bit of class, not some third rate fleecing. Think like an executive in an insurance company. A thief, make no mistake, but a thief in a suit. And that is the same as being a business man. And although people hate being robbed, they can live with doing a bit of business. Gives them an out. Makes them feel less like a bunch of cowards and more like they're simply investing in their future.

In front of the desk, two armless office chairs. Behind the desk sat a man in a bespoke suit. Not tailored in Jermyn Street or the like, most probably fashioned by some shop in the East End. A reasonable job but not the best. However, it was necessary because the man behind the desk would be unable to purchase suits off the rack. Six foot seven and over three hundred pounds of muscle. His name was Benjamin Kowalski. Everyone referred to him as Big Ben and he was Mister Stopes' man on the street.

Big Ben was busy counting out a stack of cash. When he finished he bound the wad with a rubber band, stuck it in an envelope and scrawled a name and number on the outside. Then he leaned forward and shook the hand of the man sitting opposite.

'Pleasure doing business, mister Patel.'

The man nodded and left without speaking.

‘Jamie,’ called Ben. ‘Fetch missus Johnson.’

Jamie threw a military style salute and jogged into the community center, holding his jeans up with one hand as he ran. In one of the small halls in the center stood a group of around thirty people. Merchants, grocers, scrap metal dealers, builders, prostitutes, pimps and muggers. A proper cross section of lower to lower-middle class London.

And all of them paid Mister Stopes a nominal sum of ten percent of their weekly turnover. In return he and his men insured that no electrical fires started in their premises. Or that none of them suffered mysterious work related accidents such as broken fingers or noses. Also, Mister Stopes could arrange to have trash delivered to your premises. In ten ton dump trucks. And no one wanted that.

But the relationships went deeper than that. He also made sure that no other criminal element bothered his clients. And, if you were in a real financial pinch and could prove it with audited books, then Mister Stopes could organize a short term loan at rates that were less than double the going bank rate. He also remembered everyone’s birthdays, christenings and even anniversaries. Because Mister Stopes had long ago learned that you could achieve more with a carrot and a stick than just a stick.

Most of the people were standing or sitting in silence. Sipping tepid, weak tea from polystyrene cups and nibbling on dry biscuits. There was a doctor’s waiting room atmosphere. Or maybe Head Master’s study. Tense, nervous. Hoping that nothing would go wrong.

Jamie beckoned. ‘Missus Johnson.’

She stood, put her tea down on a side table and followed baggy trouser boy out of the room.

Missus Johnson was of late middle age attempting to look like she was in her late twenties. High heels, skintight purple skirt, a bulging panty-line. Shimmering white blouse, unbuttoned low to expose her cheap breast argumentation that she got on a trip to Greece. Her mouth a slash of crimson, eyes a nightmare of thick eye-shadow and false eyelashes like spiders resting on her eyelids.

Both Jamie and Big Ben thought that she was a bit of alright.

The middle aged bottle-blonde sat down opposite Big Ben and crossed her legs slowly, pushing her breasts out as she did.

‘Good evening, Ben,’ she simpered, batting her eyelids. Then she opened her purse and pulled out a thick sheaf of twenties. As she held out the wad someone grabbed her hair and yanked her out of the van.

Ben started to stand up but with a blur of movement someone was sitting opposite him and his mind felt like it was clamped in a vice.

‘Sit.’ Ben slammed himself back into his seat. Behind the man he could see another stranger holding missus Johnson up by her hair, her

feet a foot above the ground. She was squealing like a piglet and her one eyelash-spider had crawled down her face onto her cheek, leaving a trail of black behind it.

Ben glanced towards the two men in the front of the van but they, like him, seemed to be nailed to their seats. Then two more strangers ripped the front van doors open with a scream of tortured steel. Ben frowned as he noted that the doors had literally been torn from their hinges. A feat that was humanly impossible. Or so he had thought.

Both the driver and the muscle were dragged out. The strangers picked them up by their necks and shook them like rag dolls until he heard their necks snap under the force. Then they simply dropped their lifeless bodies on the sidewalk and stood still. Waiting..

'Good evening Big Ben,' said the man seated opposite him. 'My name is Nathan Tremblay. But you shall call me *Capo*. Now, Ben, you and I are going to have a little cat.'

Ben struggled to hear clearly as, directly outside the van, missus Johnson's volume of squealing started to increase as her hair slowly pulled away from her scalp.

Nathan frowned slightly. 'Alan, for god's sake shut that bloody woman up.'

There was the sickening sound of a neck being broken and the dull thud of another corpse hitting the sidewalk.

'Thank you, Alan. Now, as I was saying, Ben. We are going to talk. Now I want you to think very carefully before answering because everything that you say, and I do literally mean everything, will be a life and death decision. Do we understand each other?'

Ben nodded.

'Speak, Ben. I do not trust non-verbal communication.'

'Yes, *Capo*. I understand,' rumbled the huge man. He could still feel the massive power of Nathan's compulsion. It scared him. But more that that it compelled him to want to please this strange man. It felt as if this man's approbation was the most important thing in Ben's life. He would do anything for him.

Nathan smiled. He was genuinely pleased. 'Very good, Ben. Now, where does Mister Stopes live?'

Ben hesitated slightly - then, 'I can take you there, *Capo*.'

Nathan nodded. 'Bit if a hesitation there, Ben my friend. See that doesn't happen again.'

'Yes, *Capo*.'

'Right, Ben you drive. I shall sit in your seat, one of my chaps will sit up front with you and the other four will follow.'

Ben stood. Then he hesitated slightly.

'Oh no, Ben. I sense a hesitation.'

Ben shook his head. 'No, *Capo*. It's just that…well, you only have six

men. That's not many. It's pay night and Mister Stopes will have at least twenty men at his place. All armed.'

Nathan smile. 'Oh, how sweet of you, Ben, you seem to actually care.' Nathan looked across at one of the men standing outside. 'Alan.'

'Yes *Capo*.'

'Did you hear? Ben was warning us. Quite the turncoat isn't he? Already a useful member of our little clique.' All of the men laughed. 'I wouldn't worry about the numbers, Ben,' continued Nathan. 'I think that you will find that the six of us quite comfortably outnumber Mister Stopes and his men. Now drive.'

It didn't take long to get to Mister Stopes' residence. A fifteen story apartment block on the corner of West Square Gardens. Big Ben simply pulled the van up outside the entrance, jumped out and opened the rear door for Nathan. All seven of them walked in, Ben leading the way.

The lobby was impressive. Polished marble, gilt mirrors, tapestries and a large water fountain in the center.

The concierge, a tall man dressed in a black suit with blue trim, walked up to them. 'Hey,' he said. 'You can't just park the van in front of the doors. Come on, Big Ben. You know the rules,'

Nathan blurred into movement, striking the concierge in the middle of his chest with a flat hand. The man took off and smashed into the fountain. Seconds later the water changed from clear to bright red as the man's blood pumped from his broken body, tinting the display.

Big Ben led them to the bank of elevators, pointing to one off to the side. 'Private,' he rumbled as he took out a card and inserted it into a slot that caused the door to open with a soft chime. They all crowded in and Ben pushed the single button marked Penthouse.

The escalator doors hissed open to revel a large double volume lobby. Two men stood in the center. They were of a type, short, wide, beefy. Round, bland faces. Like cabbage patch dolls on steroids.

The one started to greet Big Ben and then did a double take. 'Oy, Ben. What's wiv the crowd? Mister Stopes didn't say nuffin about these blokes. What gives?'

Nathan gestured with a tilt of his head. Alan, sort them out.'

The Nightwalker blurred forward and the two men dropped, blood gouting from both of their severed necks, painting the marble floor.

'Lead the way, young Ben,' said Nathan. 'Step lively, places to go and people to kill. Come on now.'

Ben showed them through to the main reception room. It was magnificent. Large, open plan. Picture windows along the one side looking out across London. Twenty plus people were gathered together, and the air was thick with cigar and cigarette smoke.

Standing in the middle of the room was a short, thick set man in a

handmade silk suit. He was smoking a comically large cigar. Like a bulldog with a bicycle pump in its mouth.

He turned to look at Big Ben and raised an eyebrow. 'Who the hell are these people?' His voice was low and rasping, like he had just recovered from a fit of coughing.

'We're gatecrashers,' said Nathan.

'Well, you're not welcome. Bugger off. Now.'

Nathan chuckled. 'So rude. And you didn't even ask what we wanted.'

'I don't care,' rasped Mister Stopes. 'In fact, you've already outstayed your time with us.' He pulled an automatic pistol from a shoulder holster and pointed it at Nathan. 'Time to start begging for your life, you ponce.'

The Nightwalkers started to move but Nathan shook his head and waved them back. 'Tell you what, Stopes my old mate,' he said. 'Let me just remove my shirt and jacket first so that I don't get blood on it. Then you can blast away.'

There was a nervous ripple of laughter from the crowd and Mister Stopes frowned. 'Are you trying to take the piss, boy? Because I am deadly serious, no one messes with Mister Stopes in his own house.'

Nathan placed his folded shirt and coat on the floor, exposing a body of muscle and sinew, with skin so white as to appear transparent. You could see the blood traveling along his veins and the striation of his muscles stood out like a backlit medical chart.

'Man,' said Mister Stopes. 'You are one creepy looking mother.' He pulled the trigger. The pistol boomed and a tongue of flame etched across the room. The 9mm slug struck Nathan in the center of his chest and exited via his back in a spray of gore. He dropped to his knees and Mister Stopes shot him two more times on the way down. Mister Stopes pointed the gun at the Nightwalkers. 'I'm actually in a good mood,' he said. 'So I'm going to let you live. Take your boss' body and get the hell out of here. Ben, you clean up and then you and I are going to have a chat.'

Nathan stood up. 'Change of plans,' he said. 'I am going to have a chat to everyone here and you, Mister Stopes, are going to die.'

Stopes grunted in surprise, pointed the pistol at Nathan and fired again. This time Nathan didn't bother to go down, he simply walked slowly towards Mister Stopes, a slight grin on his face. Stopes shot again and again until the hammer fell on an empty chamber. Nathan's chest was covered in blood but aside from that there was not a single blemish.

'Oops,' said Nathan. 'Out of bullets. Now it's my turn.' His fangs extended, and he latched into Mister Stopes' neck, ripping and tearing and grunting as he fed. The Nightwalkers stood around him and stared

at the rest of the people in the room. Daring them to do anything.

But no one moved. The spectacle before them was so out of their comfort zones that they had simply shut down. Made puppets by the impossible that they had just witnessed.

Nathan dropped Mister Stopes' exsanguinated body to the floor, threw his head back and screeched. The picture windows shivered and the humans in the room covered their ears in a vain attempt to keep out the feeding call of the *Nosferatu*.

Then he stood up and let his gaze roam the room, noting well the terror evident on everyone's faces.

'My name is Nathan Tremblay,' he said. 'But you will call me, *Capo*.'

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Chapter 22

‘It seems pretty simple to me,’ said Tag. ‘From what we’ve deduced, Nathan wants to control the London crime syndicates and families, so we stop the crime. Ergo, Nathan don’t got control over nothing.’

William shook his head. ‘Nice idea,’ he agreed. ‘But sir Jasper reckons that there are over thirty thousand policemen in the Metropolitan area. And if they can’t stamp out the crime how could we even make a difference?’

‘Easy,’ insisted Tag. ‘We be superhero, secret agent, mega-enhanced crime fighters. Also, we can venture outside the usual channels a little. Get things done quicker. No paperwork, no waiting years for trials, no reading of rights. Man, we could burn through these criminals in a few weeks. Bish, bash, bosh.’

Emily laughed. ‘Bish, bash, bosh?’

‘Yeah,’ agreed Tag. ‘Find them, punish them, move on.’

‘You know, William,’ said Em. ‘He’s got a point. I know that I could cover twenty, maybe even fifty times more area than a human police patrol in one night. Troy and the Pack as well. We can see in the dark, we can smell trouble, literally. And then there’s the gargoyles. How many of those in London?’

‘There are many gargoyles in London,’ interjected Muller. ‘But this smacks a little of vigilantism to me. Wouldn’t we be taking the law into our own hands?’

‘In a way we would,’ agreed William. ‘However, we are MI7 agents, so strictly speaking, we are the law.’

The church knight shrugged. ‘Tenuous but I’ll accept that.’

‘Right then,’ said Tag as he stood up. ‘Let’s do it.’

‘Whoa,’ countered William. ‘Steady on, old chap. Plan first. Let’s sort out the whole, when, where, who and how before we go galloping through London like some sort of natural disaster.’

Tag sat down. ‘Sorry. That be true.’

‘Good man,’ said William. ‘Right, this is how I see it happening; if we are going to operate in London, then we need to move the Pack up to the city. Troy, break the Pack down into teams of five or so. Then book hotels for them all. Nothing too fancy. Two, three star places, we don’t want to stand out.’

‘Couldn’t we have smaller teams, say two wolves each?’ Asked Troy.

‘After all, no amount if street thugs would be a match for a single wolf let alone two. Then we could cover more ground.’

William shook his head. ‘No way. What if they run into a bunch of those new generation bloodsuckers? Five is the bare minimum. Perhaps six or seven is better. Then when they patrol, make sure they have at least two wolves up high, on the roofs above ready to help.’

‘Right,’ agreed Troy. ‘Forgot about the vamps. We’ll definitely run onto them at some stage.’

‘Good. Get a map and grid the area out. Assign each team an area. Then I want you, Em, Tag, Bastian, Muller and Sylvian at the Shadowhunter penthouse. You guys can also patrol but I envisage you more as a rapid-response team. Anything goes wrong then you get there fast. Em, can you liaise with Coldstone and the gargoyles? Oh, and finally, Tag – leave Missus Jones at home. Sir Jasper would go mental if you brought down a firefight in the city.’

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‘Right,’ said Nathan. ‘Big Ben, introduce me to these nice people.’

Ben nodded and stepped forward. He started at the one end of the room, pointing at each person as he called out their name, what they did and their connection to the ex-Mister Stopes and his organization.

‘Paul Levy. East side of the river. Drugs and prostitution. Been a member for over ten years now.’ He proceeded to the next man. ‘Jack Barlow. Protection. SOHO and surrounds. Runs a gang of around thirty boys. Been a member for eight years.’

Nathan shook each man by the hand, not caring that his entire arm was drenched in sticky, red blood that stained everything that he touched.

The gang members were all too terrified to react in any other way than either stunned silence or a deferential nod and a whispered, *Capo*.

The last person to be introduced was the only woman in the group. Of medium height. Slender. Pencil skirt, above the knees. Fashionable but flat shoes. Skin as pale as a shroud, a short black bob and lips painted a deep, fallen-soul scarlet.

‘Miss Penelope Garden,’ introduced Big Ben. ‘Protection. Wimbledon and suburbs. Also confidence and hacking. Fairly new to the group.’

She curtsied and greeted Nathan, her voice husky, her breath all musk and wood. ‘My Lord.’

Nathan stopped and grinned. ‘Penelope,’ he answered. ‘I have a feeling that you and I shall be getting along just fine.’

‘Perhaps we can have a drink together afterwards,’ suggested miss Garden. ‘Just to touch base, as it were.’

‘Perhaps,’ agreed Nathan.

Penelope smiled and her eyes flashed a tiny hint of victory. A touch of belief that she was in control.

'What blood group are you?' Asked Nathan.

'I'm sorry?'

'You heard me. Blood group?'

'I think, O positive.'

Nathan nodded. 'Good. Yes, I think that we shall meet afterwards. For a drink.'

The expression on miss Garden's face fell as her momentary surge of confidence melted away to be replaced by fear and trepidation.

'But first,' continued Nathan. 'We need to talk about how things are going to be run from now on. Big Ben here shall be my mouthpiece when I am not with you. He speaks with my voice. If anyone disobeys or even hesitates when he gives one of my orders, then that person, their family and their friends will become fodder for the brethren. Now do not worry overly much, I am not going to change things to any great degree. Instead of paying tribute to Stopes you shall pay to me. My Nightwalkers and my Bloodwraiths will also be patrolling my streets at night. They will take care of anyone who is either not part of this organization or anyone who is attempting to carve out a solo career. In other words, you work for me or you don't work at all.

Now listen very carefully because this part is important.' He pulled folded piece of paper from his trouser pocket, unfolded it and held it up for all to see. On it was an artist's impression of Emily. He had no photos, but the drawing had been skillfully done, the artist even managing to capture the ethereal light that shone in the teenage girls eyes. 'I shall leave this with Ben. He will make copies for you all. Many copies. You will instruct all of your people to look out for this girl. Find her for me and you shall be rewarded. If you find her then contact me through Big Ben. Do not attempt to apprehend her as that would not end well for you. Do you all understand?'

Everyone nodded.

'Good. Any questions?'

No one spoke.

'Oh, come now,' urged Nathan. 'Speak up. I don't bite.' He laughed. 'Oh, of course I do. But I won't bite you for asking a question.'

Paul Levy put his hand up. '*Capo*,' he started. 'What is a Nightwalker? And a Bloodwraith?'

Nathan gestured at his bodyguards. 'Nightwalkers. They are members of the *Nosferatu* who I have deemed to be the *very* best of the best. Bloodwraiths are the best of the best.'

Levy kept his hand up.

'Yes?' Snapped Nathan.

'Sorry, *Capo*. Just to be sure about this…umm…you are vampires,

are you not?'

Nathan smiled, pulling his lips back to expose his fangs. 'That would be an affirmative, yes.'

'Are you going to turn us into vampires?' Continued Levy.

'No,' answered Nathan. 'Not yet.'

There was a collective sigh of relief.

'But I still might eat some of you. However, not now. Time is wasting and I have a set of twins and their mother to visit.' He glanced at his watch. 'Six hours until sunrise, that should be more than enough time.' He picked up his shirt and jacket, bowed and left the room, leaving two Nightwalkers behind to watch over his new den of iniquity.

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Chapter 23

The house must have cost north of ten million Pound Sterling. Electric gates, in-out driveway and large, double volume portico-style entrance. It was situated in Richmond, behind the cemetery, overlooking the park.

The house sported a discreet brass plaque next to the gate. Plumpton Manor…please ring bell for entrance. Above the sign was a swivel mounted CCTV camera.

Nathan didn't bother to ring. Instead, he simply told Alan to get out of the limousine and open the gates. The *Nosferatu* did so by grabbing them and pulling, tearing them off their hinges and stripping the gears and locking mechanisms as he did so. He cast them aside and got back into the car. The driver pulled up outside the portico, jumped out and held the door for Nathan.

The *Capo* strode up the steps and opened the front door open, smashing it into the entrance hall with one punch.

'Cooee,' he called. 'Come on out Aunty Plumpton, you have visitors.'

An old man appeared at the end of the corridor. He shuffled slowly down the long white hallway until he was a few feet away from the four vampires.

'And who might you be?' Enquired Nathan.

The old man looked up at him and scowled. 'I might be the king of Siam,' he said. 'But that would be unlikely. As it is, I be Monty. I be the Plumpton's driver. Have been for thirty year now. And I tell you, young man, Aunty is gonna be mighty pissed at you for breaking her gate and her front door. Mighty pissed. What your problem you keep breaking stuff? Anyways, why you here?'

Nathan laughed. 'Oh, the faithful old family retainer. Plucky and cantankerous but with a heart of gold. Well, I'm afraid that we shan't be needing you, Monty. So, I'm going to have to let you go. You're fired.' Nathan struck the old man in the chest so hard that his sternum and ribcage folded in like a collapsed balloon. The sound of his breaking ribs was audible in the room. A crackle of splintering bone. He dropped to the floor without a sound, desperately and unsuccessfully trying to suck some air into his ruined, punctured lungs.

'Come along,' commanded the *Capo* as he strode down the corridor and into a large withdrawing room. The nightwalkers followed closely

behind him.

In the withdrawing room sat three people. Two men dressed in almost identical dark suits and a tall, bony woman who looked like a man in drag.

The woman was holding a double barreled shotgun, and it was pointed directly at Nathan.

The *Capo* could see her finger tightening on the trigger as he walked in so he held up his hand and unleashed his coercion. 'Stop.'

The old woman started to shake as she desperately tried to break his mental hold on her.

'Impressive,' admitted Nathan. 'You are a very strong lady. Beyond willful. I actually have to put in a fair amount of effort to control you.' He stepped forward and took the weapon from her hands. Then he casually bent the barrels into a U-shape and gave it back to her.

'There you go,' he said. 'Best to remove the temptation. Now we can chat like civilized adults.'

'You killed, Monty,' spluttered missus Plumpton.

'Did I? Oh, you mean the old retainer. I'm sorry, was he a friend?'

'Of course not,' replied Aunty in an affronted voice. 'He was a mere servant. But he was my servant, and you had no right to kill him.'

'I see,' said Nathan. 'Pray tell, Missus Plumpton, or may I call you, Aunty? Do you have any more servants in the house?'

'Of course,' answered Aunty. 'We aren't peasants, you know. There's cook, the two maids and the gardener. Mind you, the gardeners not here at the moment, he lives out.'

'Call them,' commanded Nathan.

With gritted teeth, Aunty gestured for one of the twins to pull a bell cord. He did so vigorously and then sat down again, never taking his eyes off his mother.

Under a minute later the cook, a plump woman of indeterminate middle age, and two younger girls dressed in classic black and white maids outfits, stood in a row in front of Nathan.

'Alan,' said the *Capo*. 'Kill them.'

There was a blur of movement and three decapitated bodies fell to the floor. To the Plumpton's credit, none of them screamed or shouted. They simply stared in amazement both at the speed and the bloodiness of the multi-beheadings.

'You see, Aunty,' said Nathan. 'I have the right to kill whoever I want. You, however, live and die by my whim. So a little less attitude from you will go a long way. Do you understand?'

Aunty Plumpton sneered and said nothing.

Nathan grinned. 'Such spirit. Pity that you're such a dried up old hag, I might have fancied you in your day.'

'How dare you?' Asked Aunty.

Nathan sighed and shook his head. Then he turned to face the twins. ‘Good evening, gentlemen,’ he greeted. ‘Which one is which?’

‘I’m Barry and this is Larry.’

‘Ah yes,’ noted Nathan. ‘Different color suits. The navy blue suits you, Larry. And the midnight blue compliments your eyes perfectly, Barry.’

The twins both smiled expansively. Absurdly pleased that the *Capo* had noticed their sartorial differences.

‘Now, lads,’ continued Nathan. ‘You mother is a rather headstrong character. Old and set in her ways. Mister Stopes, oh, sorry, I take it that you do know mister Stopes?’

The twins nodded.

‘Yes, of course. So, as I was saying. Mister Stopes was much the same. So, obviously, I had to dispatch him. I must be honest with you, I am thinking of doing the same to your dear mother. But before I do, I would like to get your input. Should she stay or should she go? If you think that I should spare her, and you are both sure that she will remain under control then I shall follow your advice. But be it on your heads.’

‘Ha,’ interjected Aunty Plumpton. ‘My boys would never condemn me,’ she shouted. ‘Looks like you’re stuck with me, mister hoity-toity.’

Larry leaned close to his brother, and they had a quick whispered conversation.

‘We have a question,’ said Larry.

‘Ask away.’

‘Who would be in charge if mother was gone?’

‘Why, you two, of course,’ answered Nathan.

‘Then I think, we think, that there is no need to spare her,’ said Larry. ‘We only ask that you make it quick. After all, she is our mother.’

Barry tapped Larry on the shoulder and whispered into his ear again.

‘Okay,’ said Barry. ‘Sorry, sir,’ he continued. ‘Barry says that there really is no need to make it quick. Take as long as you want.’

‘You reprobates,’ shrieked Aunty Plumpton. ‘You cowardly, useless, evil, bastards.’

‘Mother,’ retorted Barry. ‘Language, please.’

Nathan walked over to the old woman and let his fangs extend. Then he slowly lowered his head to her neck and sank his canines into her, inch by agonizing inch.

And, finally, she screamed in pure terror.

Afterwards he licked his lips, stood up and addressed the twins.

‘From now on,’ he said. ‘You will call me, *Capo*.’

And he took out a picture of Emily.

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Chapter 24

The people that William referred to as the ‘Core Team’ were ensconced in the penthouse apartment above St. Pancras Station. William, Troy, Bastian, Dietz and Sylvian. And of course, Emily.

Merlin had stayed in the forest residence with the Prof.

The rest of the Pack had been divided up into six teams and spread around London in various mid range hotels.

There are over one thousand churches in London but many of them no longer had sentient gargoyle guardians on them. There were still a scattering of gargoyles on various public buildings, libraries, theaters and some private clubs. But on the whole, if the Pack was going to clamp down on criminal activities it would be by putting foot, or paw, to pavement.

Em sat in an armchair in the main sitting room and stared out of the large windows, watching the city enter the night as the sun went down.

As usual, the boys had all collected in the kitchen. A bottle of Jack Daniels and a pack of playing cards and they were happy. Texas Holdem.

Tag was telling a story about his grandmother, a pile of sweet potatoes and a jerked chicken.

The gargoyles were silent.

Em could feel the Pack on the edge of her mind. Always there. She could feel William. And Troy. She knew that their feelings for her were strong. But those feelings were so mixed up with reverence, protectiveness, watchfulness and chivalry all gathered together under the auspices of the Pack that she had no real idea what they felt for her on a strictly personal basis. Just because someone is prepared to die for you does not necessarily mean that they love you. I mean, secret service agents didn’t love the president but they would take a bullet for him without hesitation. In fact they didn’t even have to like the person that they were protecting. She wondered if that was simply the case with William and Troy. Duty.

She also had nothing to gage her own feelings against. William was actually the only man that she had ever kissed and she was pretty sure that she wouldn’t get a chance to kiss, let alone meet, another normal human being.

How could she? One of the core team was always watching out for

her. She lived in a cocoon of protection. And even if she did meet a normal boy. What then?

'Hi, I'm Emily. I'm sorta a vampire. I think that I might also be part werewolf, maybe even a gargoyle. Who knows? I'm not immortal but I am so close that it makes no difference. I've traveled a lot but haven't seen much of the countries that I've been in on account of spending a lot of time under the ground in hidden cities. Oh, I went to the river Styx once. Met Charon the ferryman of Hades. He gave me an axe. I call it Deathwalker.

I'm stronger than an entire football team, run faster than a cheetah and could beat Bruce Lee and Chuck Norris in a fight at the same time.

Yeah, I know – what a turn on.

Also, I can't cook, only started wearing proper makeup a year or so ago and oh, before I forget…I'm a bit of a mass murderer. I'm a Leo and I like taking long walks on the beach. But I don't drink blood anymore…so that's a plus.'

She stood up. 'Darn it,' she said to herself. 'I need to get out. Alone.'

She left via the front window knowing that they would hear her if she left via the front door. She climbed up to the roof, invisible in the night time shadows. Then she jumped down the back of the building, headed to the station and caught a tube.

She had been gone for over ten minutes when Troy stopped playing cards and cocked his head to one side. 'She's not here,' he said.

Immediately all of the men stood up. William rushed through to the sitting room and Tag checked the other rooms.

'No one here but us,' concurred Tag.

'Right,' said William. 'I'll wait in case she comes back. You lot split up. Troy and Sylvian take the roofs. Dietz, Tag, Bastian. The streets. Go gentlemen. Find her and protect her.'

***

Emily took the tube to Temple Station and then walked to the center of London. Not the three hundred-year-old plaque in Trafalgar Square that marks the traditional center of the city but an obscure spot next to an old Victorian bench in front of King's College. The actual geographical center.

She sat on the bench and allowed her senses to roam.

On a whim, she was trying something that she had never attempted before. She could vaguely feel the Pack wandering the city. As well as that she could connect with the many gargoyles. But instead of communicating with them she merely let her mind wash over them. Linking with their unconscious as opposed to the conscious thoughts. Trying to feel what they felt, or even see what they were seeing.

Hoping for some sort of drone's-eye view of the city.

As she scanned, she could feel William and Troy. They were concerned. Looking for her. She knew that she should put their minds at ease but she simply needed some time alone.

She relaxed more, obtaining an almost Zen-like state

And then she saw all. But the images were jumbled up in her head. Too many all at once, flooding her senses. Confusing – like some sort of 60's acid flashback. Or an early MTV Video. Disjointed and random. So she pushed them all to the back of her mind, allowing only the strongest feelings to come through. And she felt the pull. She felt fear.

She stood up and walked over to the front of King's College. Then she scaled the walls and headed for the roof. There she stood for a while, looking out over London. The Eye. The Gherkin building. The iconic skyline.

As soon as she had her bearings she started to move, running and jumping from building to building. Heading west towards Mayfair. Not sure why, simply following her feeling. All the time the flashing images assailed her senses, but she kept them at the back of her mind, instead allowing only the simple gut feelings to permeate through. Skimming on a subconscious level. Following the scent of someone's fear. Their panic.

This was something that the Pack could do with ease. Especially when they were full wolf. A normal wolf can hear a conversation from almost eight miles away. Its sense of smell is over one hundred times greater than a humans and its eyesight is more sensitive to movement than the highest grade of military motion detector. And the Pack were not normal wolves. In fact they were to a wolf as an Olympic athlete is to a toddler. In short, as long as one of the Pack was within a couple of city blocks of an incident then Emily would know.

The Daywalker stayed on the rooftops as she traveled, moving at super-speed, exploding across major roads, keeping to the moonlight and neon-created shadows. Letting the feeling pull her west like an iron axe head to a lodestone.

It took her mere minutes to complete a trip that would have taken almost an hour by car and not less than half of that on foot.

There are around one hundred acts of criminal violence reported every day in London and surrounds. Considering that this is a city of almost nine million souls that is not a bad statistic, unless, of course, you happen to be one of those one hundred people. Then that crime rate is very high indeed.

But it also remains a fact that, if you can cover enough ground and you have the ability to feel fear, then you are pretty much assured of encountering at least one of those criminal acts.

Below her was an alleyway, a shortcut from the Five Star Connaught

Hotel to the parking garages on the High Street. Low lighting, no line of sight from the main street or the hotel. A perfect place to ambush wealthy patrons after they had had a bite to eat or a drink at the hotel and were now heading back to their car.

Three men were holding a middle aged couple at knifepoint. Moonlight glittered off the woman's bejeweled fingers and ruby studded necklace. The man's gold Rolex and diamond pinky ring a further testament to easy pickings.

The man was on his knees and blood ran freely down the side of his face. Above his eye a bone-deep cut. One of the thug's blades was a dull red.

All three criminals were laughing. Forced, high pitched faux-mirth that they thought enhanced their macho-ness. Their street vibe. It showed how little they cared.

Look at us, we're bad, we're mean. And we enjoy it so much that we laugh while we do it.

And then vengeance dropped from the sky.

The woman screamed and all three thugs flinched.

'What the hell?' Shouted one. 'Where did you come from?'

Emily wasn't in the mood for banter or wisecracks. Instead she dispatched the three criminals swiftly and efficiently. Four seconds later all three lay on the floor, arms and legs bent at impossible angles. Their knives were all stuck deep into an adjacent Oak tree, only their hilts protruding.

She helped the victim to his feet and inspected the cut. 'You'll need stitches,' Em told him. 'Here,' she took his handkerchief from his top pocket, wadded it up and pushed it against the wound. 'Keep pressure on. Go to the hotel. They'll call someone to help.'

He nodded. 'Thank you.'

Em smiled, ran to the end of the alleyway, leaped onto a second floor balcony, turned, waved and disappeared.

On top of the roofs once again she opened her mind, felt the pull and moved.

Within the next two hours she had stopped two more muggings, thwarted a car theft and prevented a smash and grab robbery at a jewelry store.

She was busy looking down at two armed men as they approached a late night pawn shop when Troy appeared next to her, materializing out of the dark in full Wolfman mode. He said nothing but his unblinking golden eyes spoke volumes.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I needed some time alone.'

Troy growled softly and pointed at the two approaching men. They had both drawn sawn off double barrel shotguns from beneath long coats and were about to enter the pawn shop. The Wolfman drew his

paw across his throat.

Emily nodded, and they both leaped from the building and landed behind the armed thieves. A blur of movement and the shotguns had been turned into steel and wood pretzels and the thugs were unconscious on the sidewalk, their arms in a similar condition to their weapons.

Emily opened the door and beckoned to the shopkeeper. 'Excuse me, sir,' she called. 'Could you call the police? There are two men out here with shotguns. Not to worry, my partner and I have taken care of them, I doubt that they'll be a problem for at least a few hours but they need to be cleared away.' She waved goodbye and blew a kiss. 'Bye, now. Have a good evening.'

By the time he got to the door there was no sign of Emily or Troy.

***

Emily sat at the kitchen table. In front of her a large mug of Tag's steaming hot, syrupy sweet tea.

'You need to tell us when you are going out,' said William.

'If I did, then you would send someone with me,' countered Em.

'Only for your own safety,' insisted William. 'We need to protect you. I'm afraid that I must insist.'

Em stared at the Omega, her expression blank but her eyes betraying her emotions. Her anger. 'Protect me? Insist?' She asked. 'Poor little Emily needs protecting by the big strong men. Can I please have the big strong men's permission to take a walk by myself? Excuse me, sir, but could I have permission to leave the room?' She stood up. 'I think that we had better get one thing straight here, mister male chauvinist Wolfman. If I want to go out by myself, then I will. I don't need your permission or your protection.'

'What if you run into a group of vamps?' Asked William as he stood up to face her. 'What then?'

Emily slatted her eyes and pushed her jaw out. 'I will take care of them.'

'Oh, just like that,' snapped William.

Emily growled and unleashed the full force of her coercion. William was slammed back into his seat and the rest of the men around the table could not stand up either, even though they shook with the effort.

Then Deathwalker appeared in Emily's right hand. She walked up to William and held the axe in front of his face. 'Yes,' she said. 'Just like that.'

Then the axe disappeared and Emily shut her coercion down, allowing the men to move once again.

Tag laughed out loud. 'Man,' he said. 'That was scary. I tell you

what, I felt like a child strapped to the naughty chair. Couldn't move a muscle.'

'Sorry,' said Em. 'But I needed to prove a point.'

'That wasn't the point that needed proving,' said Troy. 'We all know how formidable you are. We know how powerful you are. We know all of those things. But when we don't know where you are it worries us. If only for our sakes, Em,' he asked. 'Let us know when you're going out. I know that you need some alone time but don't shut us out. Please.'

'What he said,' added William. 'And I'm sorry if I sounded condescending, it's difficult for me. I mean, I am the Omega, after all. I'm used to obedience.'

'I'm not Pack,' said Emily.

William laughed. 'Yes you are,' he said. 'You're just different. But whatever you do or say, you cannot stop us trying to protect you. So you're just going to accept it and tough it out.'

'Well you know where I stand, girly,' said Tag. 'I be your bodyguard so I do have to insist on knowing where you are. It's part of my job description.'

Em shook her head and then smiled. 'Thanks guys,' she said. 'It's good to know that you all care. I'll try harder. When I need to be alone, I'll tell you.'

The men nodded their agreement.

'On the plus side,' continued William. 'Between Em and the Pack we prevented or interceded in eleven separate incidents last night. That pretty much means that we took care of around ten percent of the crime in the city. We keep that up and it's going to have an effect on Nathan and his plans. Also, as word gets around, I reckon that we'll find that quite a few criminals are going to be looking for easier work that doesn't involve the risk of the night coming alive and beating the crap out of them.'

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Chapter 25

The next night Em went out with Troy and Bastian to keep her company. The rest of the Pack roamed the streets as they had the night before.

Em found that she was not as efficient when working with others. The two men distracted her thought process and she was less able to sense the sources of trouble and fear. Nevertheless, they still managed to put a stop to two muggings and a car theft, leaving the perpetrators bent and broken on the sidewalks.

One of the Pack teams, however, came across a crime of far greater magnitude and their response was vicious and overwhelming.

It was just before midnight and the two young girls were taking a shortcut through St. Mary's Church Yard. They climbed through the broken wire fence and turned left into Biggleswade Passage, a short, unlighted alleyway that led to Elliot's Row where Charlotte lived.

Both her and Susan shouldn't have been out that late, both of them had yet to see their thirteenth birthdays but Charlottes single-mum worked nightshift and Susan's parents were well drunk by ten o'clock almost every night. So she tended to stay at Charlotte's most of the time. Her parents didn't actually seem to even notice that she was seldom at home.

The two girls had both popped out to see a movie and missed the night bus so had to walk home, turning a ten o'clock arrival into a midnight one. From a safe stroll into a nightmare.

There were four of them. Grown men. The youngest, twenty-two years old. The leader in his mid-thirties. They had nicknames. Stomper, Masher, Switchblade and Hammertime. Collectively they had spent over thirty years in juvenile court or prison, graduating from petty theft, up through the leagues to GBH and armed robbery. They had been drinking heavily, and it was now time to move to the next level. Rape and, most possibly torture followed by murder.

They snatched the girls as they exited Biggleswade Passage, bundling them roughly into the back of a white van, slapping them hard as they did so in order to stifle any cries for help. Then they drove for a short while, stopping outside an industrial storage unit in the Stopford Industrial Center behind the station. The girls were muscled inside a storage area and the doors slammed behind them.

A single large room. Concrete floors. A few standing floor lamps

creating pools of shadow in the large cavernous space. Two broken sofas and two single, steel canteen chairs in the center of the room. The men took a roll of duct tape and bound the girls to the chairs. Legs taped to the chair legs and arms strapped behind their backs.

'Right,' sneered Stomper. 'Time for some fun, hey lads?'

Masher giggled, his voice high and loud. Switchblade pulled out a knife and flicked it open. The blade gleamed dully in the lamplight. He moved forward and ran it down Charlotte's cheek. She started to scream, but he backhanded her, splitting her lip and bruising her cheek. 'You make a noise, sweetheart,' he said, as he placed the tip of his blade in her left nostril. 'And uncle Switchblade with cut your friggin nose open.'

Masher giggled again. High. Strident. Almost like a train whistle.

'Please,' whispered Susan.

'Oh very polite,' said Stomper. 'Please. Okay, as you asked so nicely, I'll do you first.' He stepped over and tore at Susan's blouse, scattering the buttons and tearing the fabric to expose her training bra. 'Oh, sweet,' sneered Stomper. 'Pink. With a butterfly on.'

Susan started to whimper, too afraid to cry out.

'Hey,' called Stomper. 'Switchblade, come over here and cut that bra of, will you. And don't be too gentle, nothing wrong with a few surface cuts to spice things up a bit.'

Switchblade swaggered over and extended his knife hand. But before he reached Susan, there was a blur of movement and he disappeared as a huge shadow smashed into him and carried him off.

Then the building was full of the sound of growling. Low and deep and visceral. The windows shook and you could feel the timbre deep in your soul. A sound that connected directly to your Amygdala and spoke to your survival system. And it said – All Hope Is Lost.

Two of the surviving gangsters drew knives. Hammertime drew a six shot 38 special. All about them shadows moved. Impossibly fast, seeming to disappear and then appear in another completely different place.

All the while the growling continued. A choir of insanity.

Both Susan and Charlotte were almost comatose with fear.

Then the wolves struck.

Stomper and Smasher went down in a welter of blood and Hammertime pulled off a few shots, missing with all of them.

And then one of the wolves walked slowly up to Hammertime. He was huge. As big as a horse. Hammertime pointed his pistol at the great animal and pulled the trigger. Once. Twice. Click, empty. Both shots struck the wolf in the center of its chest. It didn't even blink.

Then it walked up to the would be child rapist and calmly bit his head off.

Finally Charlotte screamed.

But the wolf walked over and, with a deftness that seemed impossible from such huge teeth, it stripped the tape from both of the girl's arms and legs. Then it lay down in front of them and put its head on its paws.

When the girls looked around, they saw four more wolves. All of them lying down, heads on the floor. Relaxed.

'They're not going to eat us,' whispered Charlotte to Susan. 'I think that they're friendly.'

'Oh yeah,' breathed Susan. 'Tell that to the pervert with no head.'

'Doesn't count,' argued Charlotte. 'He's a baddy.'

The wolf shuffled forward on its belly until it was next to Charlotte then it raised its massive head up, opened it jaws…and licked her face.

Charlotte giggled. 'Stop it, that tickles.'

Then the wolf nudged her with its nose, pushing her towards the door.

'They want us to go. It's telling us that it's safe,' said Charlotte.

The wolf nodded.

So, on rubbery legs, the two girls left the building. The wolf followed them to the road. Charlotte looked at him for a moment and then threw her arms around his neck. 'Thank you, mister wolf,' she said.

The wolf looked at her with his big golden eyes. Then he winked once and was gone.

***

Once again William stared out of the window at the revolving sign that read 'New Scotland Yard'. Behind him, seated at his desk, head in his hands and breathing like he was suffering from an asthma attack, was sir Jasper.

'Okay, Jasper, old man,' said William. 'You wanted to see me and I can tell that there is a problem. Best get it out in the open before you rupture yourself.'

'I honestly do not know where to start,' said sir Jasper.

'Obviously it has something to do with the way that my Pack are handling things. Come on, spit it out.'

Jasper shuddered. 'Your Pack. Good God, man. Can't you at least call them your chaps, or your fellows? Pack is just so…'

'Primeval,' suggested William. 'Primitive. Visceral. Honest. They are wolves. They are Pack. And the last time that I looked they had dropped the crime rate in the city by over ten percent. More than that, they are spreading fear amongst the thieving classes that will, very soon, develop into an exponential drop in crime. The night no longer belongs to the criminal element – it belongs to us. You cannot hide in

the shadows if you suspect that those self-same shadows may very well come alive and eat you.'

'But it smacks of pure vigilantism,' argued Jasper.

'Rubbish. The Pack are registered agents of MI7. We are a legitimate arm of Her Majesty's Government.'

'But last night was too much,' said Jasper.

'Why?'

'Good God, William,' spluttered Jasper. 'Your Pack killed and dismembered four adult men.. Then they threw the dismembered body parts over the walls of Belmarsh prison. Each piece had a hand written note attached. It read, "On all wrongs, swift vengeance waits".'

'It was a warning,' countered William. 'Those men were well known bandits, and they were about to rape, torture and kill two little girls not quite into their teens. Pack law states that the children are sacrosanct. No evil against them will be accepted. All child molesters will be dealt with in the harshest possible manner.'

Jasper stood up. 'William,' he said. 'Please, we live in a civilized world.'

'Do we?' Asked William. 'Tell that to those young girls.'

***

Later that evening Troy walked into the kitchen in the penthouse apartments. As usual everyone was sitting around the table, drinking tea.

He laid a piece of paper on the table.

'Wassup?' Asked Tag.

Troy gestured at the paper.

Tag picked it up. 'It's you,' he said to Emily. 'It's a drawing of you.'

'Where did you get it?' Asked Em.

'The Pack,' answered Troy. 'On the street. They're finding them on most of the criminals that they take down. There's hundreds of copies out there. It's like someone has put a criminal APB out on you.'

'Oh crap,' said Bastian. 'That's what this is all about. Nathan is recruiting the underworld so that he can get to Em.'

Everyone turned to look at her.

'Damn,' cursed Em. 'I suppose that this is the last time that I get to be alone for a while.'

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Chapter 26

Betty Grant, the manager of Madame Petunias House of Fun, heard an almighty crash as the front door was smashed off its hinges. She looked up at her row of CCTV screens to see a slightly built, dark-haired man with a hat and a large Jamaican-looking man carrying a heavy-looking rucksack.

She pushed the panic button under her desk, calling her two Nigerian security guards. They ran into the office, both carrying sawn-off shotguns and she merely pointed at the screen. They nodded and headed for the front door in order to intercept the gate crashers.

Betty followed them down the corridor and stood behind them as they challenged the two strangers.

'Hey,' shouted Anuli as he brandished his shotgun. 'You can't come breaking things here. Get out.'

'Yeah,' agreed Bako. 'What he said. Get out.'

'I'm sorry,' said the smaller man. 'We're looking for Miss Grant. Betty Grant.'

Betty waved. 'That's me. What the hell is going on here? Do you have any idea who protects us?' She shook her head. 'Obviously not. If you did, you wouldn't be here. I mean, I work for the guy and I don't even want to be here anymore.'

Sylvian raised his hat. 'Greetings, my lady,' he said, smiling at her.

Betty was hit by the full force of his Gallic good looks and sultry French accent and she actually felt her knees go weak.

'I'm afraid we do not arrive with good news. Actually, we've come to close the place down. Permanently.'

Betty shook her head. 'I can't allow that,' she said. 'The *Capo* would go mental. And then he'd eat one of us. No,' she continued. 'I think that you had better leave right now or I shall be forced to let my boys fill you with buckshot.'

Sylvian smiled again. 'Tag,' he said. 'Take care of the boys, won't you?'

'Sure,' rumbled the big man. He stepped forward and grabbed Anuli's shotgun by the barrel. As he did so, the Nigerian pulled the trigger. There was a loud bang and Tag's shirt was shredded as sixteen .38 lead balls impacted his chest with the same force as a burst from a 9mm sub-machine gun. Tag grunted, ripped the weapon from Anuli's hands and bent it into a horse shoe shape.

Then he turned to face Bako.

The second Nigerian simply dropped his shotgun and put his hands up. ‘Hey,’ he said. ‘I want nothing to do with this. Bloody vampires eating people and big Jamaicans with superhuman strength that don’t mind getting shot with two barrels of double-aught buckshot. This just be too freaky man. I’m going home, back to Lagos.’

Tag nodded. ‘Both of you. Go, before I change my mind.’

The two security men scuttled out the broken front door and disappeared around the corner, running like rabbits from a fox.

‘Now, Miss Betty,’ instructed Sylvian. ‘Please could you call all the girls and the customers to the front of the house?’ He glanced at his watch. ‘I will give them ten minutes, and then anyone left inside the building will probably be killed in the fire. Come on, time is wasting.’

Ten minutes later a small group of people stood outside the house of Madame Petunia and watched the flames take hold.

The rucksack that Tag had been carrying had contained a number of incendiary grenades plus five gallons of a Napalm-like substance that the Prof had manufactured for them. So the building had gone up like the proverbial Roman Candle and had burned down to ground level in mere minutes.

So, by the time the fire department arrived there was nobody there and the house was a smoldering wreck. Betty Grant and her girls had vacated the area, as had the clients, so the fire department had no one to question. They hosed the place down to prevent the fire spreading, left a guard and went back to the station.

The next afternoon The Twins came around to check on their number one source of income only to find that they were now the proud owners of a fire blackened building plot, as opposed to a swinging, money-making house of ill repute.

Needless to say, neither twin was that impressed with the protection that the *Capo* had promised. Actually, it would be reasonable to say that they were not impressed at all.

The only thing that was consoling them was the fact that the second most profitable part of their operation, an opium den and drug wholesaler in Fulham, was still operating at top speed and making more money than ever before.

That next morning they received the news that the opium den had been burned to the ground. The clients had been spared but the drug dealers themselves had all perished in the blaze.

The Twins decide that it was time to call the *Capo*.

***

Big Ben was waiting for The Twins when the escalator doors opened.

Nathan had decamped into Mister Stopes' penthouse and Ben had become his right-hand-human, go-to-man and personal slave. The huge cockney was a shadow of his former self. His thick head of hair had visibly thinned to the point that he had affected a loose comb-over. His round, stolid face was now a mass of loose skin, jowls and scowls. And his suit hung on his frame like a giants robes upon a dwarfish thief.

In short, Big Ben was now medium Ben. Working closely with the *Nosferatu* obviously did not become him.

'Come in,' he greeted. 'The master awaits.'

The Twins walked into the main reception room, joining a group of another ten men. They recognized a few of them. Only a few short days away they were the opposition. Now they all worked under the auspices of the *Capo*.

Nathan strode into the room. 'Greetings,' he said. 'I know why you lot are here,' he continued, pointing at the ten men. 'Some sort of deposition. But you two, for what do I owe the pleasure?'

'We have a problem,' answered Barry.

'A few problems,' added Larry.

'As do we, *Capo*,' interjected Jack Barlow. 'I used to run a firm of thirty lads, east of the river. Protection and the like.'

'So?' Asked Nathan. 'What's the problem?'

'Well as of this morning I only run a firm of fourteen. The rest are either banged up in jail, absconded due to being too scared to venture out onto the streets or, worse, dead. Even the ones I got left ain't much use to man or boy. They hear a loud noise and start bloody whimpering.'

'And whose fault is that, mister Barlow?' Asked Nathan.

'Well it's not mine,' argued Jack. 'I ain't done nothing different. It's those things that are patrolling the streets at night.'

'What things?'

'I dunno,' admitted Jack. 'The stories that my men have told me don't rightly make sense.'

'What things?' Insisted Nathan.

'Monsters,' said Jack. 'Wolves the size of horses. People that aren't actually people 'cause they too strong and fast and I'm told that they can fly.'

'Yeah,' added Paul Levy. 'And a witch. Or something.'

'A witch?' Questioned Nathan.

'Apparently,' insisted Paul. 'She looks like a young girl but actually she's like the worst of all of the monsters. She can be in two places at the same time and she just has to look at you and you die. Or so they say,' he ended lamely.

'And who are…they?' Asked Nathan. 'Please tell.'

‘Well, them, you know,’ said Paul. ‘The people in the know.’

Nathan smiled. ‘So,’ he said to himself. ‘Emily has come out to play. Excellent.’ Then he walked over to Jack. ‘I suspect that your discipline has become rather lax,’ he said.

Jack shook his head. ‘No,’ he denied.

Nathan hit him on the side of his face with an open hand. The sound of his jaw breaking was audible over the crack of the slap. ‘I was speaking,’ said Nathan. ‘Now, go back to your lads. I am sending one of the Nightwalkers with you. He will explain to them that there are things that are more terrifying than wolves or witches. Then they will continue to do their jobs. Now go.’

Jack staggered from the room followed by one of Nathan’s Nightwalkers.

‘Bartholomew,’ called Nathan.

‘*Capo*,’ answered the Nightwalker.

‘Be firm but don’t break too many of them. Maybe two. Three at most.’

Bartholomew bowed. ‘Your will, *Capo*.’

‘The rest of you,’ Nathan addressed the remaining gangsters. ‘Go. From now on, bring me only good news. Any more of this unseemly whining shall be met with measures most harsh. And keep an eye out for the girl. It’s no good to me hearing half baked stories of her flying and going invisible. I want to know where she has been seen. When? By whom? At what times? Now go.’

The group left the room and filed onto the elevator, filling it to capacity.

Except for The Twins who hung back.

‘*Capo*,’ said Larry. ‘We need to talk.’

‘Why?’

‘Since you have taken over our family business, we have lost both the knocking shop and the drug den. To all intents and purposes – that’s eighty percent of our business. We’re as close to broke as we’ve ever been.’

Nathan shrugged. ‘Oh well, then what use are you to me? Two middle aged, talentless, unemployable men, lacking in moral fiber and looking for a handout.’

‘No one would have dared attack us when Mother was still around,’ said Barry.

‘In fact,’ interjected Larry. ‘Until you came along and ruined everything, no one was attacking anyone. Now, for some reason, you seem to have brought down the wrath of the gods on us all. What the hell is going on, *Capo*. I mean no disrespect but we need to know or how can we react?’

‘How can you react?’ Laughed Nathan. ‘What can you do to stand

against the Pack? Don't be pathetic, you mere mortals cannot stand against what has been unleashed. Even with my full protection you would struggle to survive. But that's not a problem. I never did expect any of you to make it through this ordeal. But as long as the girl is in play then all is going according to plan. And now, things are afoot. So,' continued the *Capo*. 'What to do with you two pathetic peons?'

The Twins ran for the stairs at the same time.

Nathan let them get far enough to almost believe that they had a chance of making it before he struck.

They both tasted exactly the same.

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Chapter 27

Nathan had collated all the info that he had on Emily but it didn't help him much. She had been sighted in so many locations in London that he could see no pattern to her movements at all. It seemed that she simply was there whenever something was going down. And usually something that involved GBH or physical harm to someone, as opposed to a break-in or willful destruction of property.

'So, Ben,' said Nathan. 'What do you make of this?'

Ben's left eye twitched, and he flinched slightly when Nathan spoke. But he knew better than to ignore the question. When the *Capo* asked, you answered.

'It's like she knows, master.'

'Knows what?'

'She knows when something is happening. She never gets there before the event. She doesn't know where our people are until they do something.'

The *Capo* stared at the ex-big man. Ben's twitching increased under his master's scrutiny and a bead of sweat rolled down his face.

Nathan smiled. 'Very good, Ben,' he said. 'Very astute. So simple yet so easily overlooked. She can sense when something is happening. It's like she has a violence radar.'

'Or fear,' added Ben. 'A fear detector.'

This time Nathan laughed out loud. 'Out of the mouths of morons,' he commented. 'Bloody brilliant. She's sensing their fear. Probably a combination of both. The punter's fear and the attacker's elation, nerves, whatever. A unique blend.' He leaned back in his chair. 'I wonder how she does it.' He asked himself.

Then he stood and patted Ben on the head like a dog. The cockney squirmed in his seat. Thankful for the praise while, at the same time, disgusted with himself and the fear that he felt for the *Capo*.

'Bartholomew,' shouted Nathan.

The Nightwalker appeared at his side like magic. 'Yes, *Capo*.'

'Put together three teams. One Nightwalker in each and fifteen Bloodwraiths. Then tomorrow night, around midnight, I want them at three separate areas in London. Then each team needs to find a small group of people, anyone, take them into a dark and secluded place and torture them. Odds are that Emily will sense at least one of the attacks and come running. Tell the teams to take her down hard. But don't kill her. Make sure they have chain, silver handcuffs, whatever

restraints that they need. Then get her to our warehouse on the Isle of Dogs. That's where we'll interrogate her and find out what she has done with the *Potestatum*.'

'It shall be done, *Capo*.'

'And make sure that they box clever,' instructed Nathan. 'Lookouts on the roofs, a perimeter. This girl is dangerous and she could have help. Probably a few wolves.'

Bartholomew smiled. 'There'll be sixteen of us in each team, *Capo*. Rest assured, we shall prevail.'

'Good, call me tomorrow night when she is at the warehouse.'

The Nightwalker bowed and left.

Nathan looked at Ben for a while, his hands steepled in front of him, expression thoughtful. Finally he spoke. 'You have done well, Benjamin,' he said. 'And as such I have decided to bestow the ultimate reward on you. I am going to turn you. I am going to gift you with immortality and power beyond your wildest dreams. So let it never be said that the *Capo* does not take care of those who serve him.'

Ben's eye stopped twitching and a look of obvious relief washed over his face.

He smiled.

Nathan smiled back.

Then Ben pulled a revolver from his jacket pocket and placed it against his own temple. 'I'd rather rot in hell,' he said. 'You evil piece of crap.'

And he pulled the trigger.

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Chapter 28

‘We’ve discussed this already,’ said William.

‘Not really,’ argued Em. ‘You guys spoke at me and told me what I was going to do. If I remember correctly, I agreed to think about it. Both Sylvian and Troy have been with me the last two times and now I want to go out by myself.’

‘Look, Em,’ said Troy. ‘Tell you what, let me come with. I promise that I won’t talk or get in the way.’

Em rolled her eyes. ‘Okay, fine. Whatever.’

The two of them left via the roof. Em pushed hard and Troy managed to keep up but had to morph into Wolfman mode to do so, tearing his clothes off as he ran.

They stopped when they reached the roof of the Shaftesbury Theater. Emily didn’t comment, but she was amazed that the young werewolf had remained with her as she had pushed as hard as she could, hoping to make a point.

Troy changed back and the two of them stood together, looking out over the capital city. They were close. So close that she could feel the heat from his body.

‘You know,’ she said. ‘I still can’t get used to the way that you wolf-dudes go around naked like its normal.’

‘It is normal,’ countered Troy. ‘And once you’ve changed then you pretty much don’t have a choice. And wolves don’t wear clothes.’

‘Yeah, granted,’ conceded Em. ‘But it’s different.’

‘Suppose so.’

Em could see Troy in her peripheral vision. His sculpted muscles. The night shadows throwing his chest and abs into stark relief. He had a slight grin on his face. Almost mocking.

‘If it makes you feel any better,’ he said. ‘You can always strip down.’

‘Ha, in your dreams.’

Troy nodded. ‘True, that,’ he said.

Em blushed. *‘Damn,’* she thought. *‘All this power and I still can’t stop blushing. Bastian would laugh at me.’*

Then she felt it. From many directions at once. ‘What the hell?’

‘What’s happening?’ Asked Troy as he felt the weight of Emily’s emotions reach out to him.

She pointed. ‘There,’ she said. ‘And there and there. Groups of

people. Innocents. Pain. Terror. They're hurting them on purpose. Torture. It all started at almost the same time.' Emily grabbed her head and squeezed. 'It's too much.'

'It's orchestrated,' said Troy. 'Why else would it start at the same time? To what purpose though?'

'Whatever it is, we have to stop it,' shouted Em.

'Slow down,' urged Troy. 'Think. Which incident is the closest?'

'There,' answered Em as she pointed. 'South-west. The others are much further away.'

'Tell the Pack,' said Troy. 'Give them the general directions. Tell them all to move. We'll take the closest one.'

Em blasted her thoughts out to the Pack. She could sense them howling in sympathy with her pain as they ran. Scanning. Searching. Hunting for the perpetrators of the evil deeds.

Then Em and Troy both felt the overwhelming strength of the Omega. 'Wait,' his command echoed in their minds. 'It's a trap. It must be.'

'I know,' said Em, 'But there's nothing else that we can do except spring it.'

'No,' returned William. 'Wait for backup.'

Emily started running, 'Can't wait. They're dying.'

Troy morphed into Wolfman mode and followed, stumbling slightly as his body refused to disobey his Omega. But then William released him from his thrall and commanded him to protect Emily.

The two of them were a blur in the night. Moving so fast they looked as though they were actually flying.

'There,' said Emily. 'At the end of that alley. Looks like an old print shop. They're inside. I reckon at east ten vamps.'

'There's more,' growled Troy. 'I can smell them. In the rooftops. Another three, maybe four. We can't do this. It's a definite ambush.'

Em shook her head. 'We can't not do it. They've already killed at least one innocent. Watch my back. I'm going in through the front. Shock and awe.'

***

Andy Vine had started the London Ghost Walk company back in 1992 and was considered to be one of the foremost Midnight Ghost Entertainers on the circuit. For ten Pounds per person he would regale a group of up to eight people with stories of terror while he guided them around the hidden areas of London.

He advertised his walking tours as 'A Night of Terror that you shall Never Forget.' It was a good bit of fun and many of his customers were repeats or were there via recommendations from their friends or

colleagues.

Tonight it was a private tour organized by a Canadian businessman. It consisted of the businessman himself, his six top sales people and the secretary that he was having an affair with.

They were all experiencing a night of terror that they would never forget. Ever. Except perhaps for Bob Townsend, head of sales (Edmonton Division). And that was because Bob was already dead. His dismembered body lay in a small pile of assorted limbs, torso and body parts in the middle of the small warehouse.

The remaining seven tour members and the guide, Andy Vine, sat in a circle around the gory pile. Behind each stood a Bloodwraith. At the far end of the room stood a Nightwalker named Carl. Beside him the remaining three Bloodwraiths.

The Bloodwraiths in the circle were playing a game. Each took a turn to damage the person in front of them in such a way as to bring about the most pain, fear or damage without actually killing them. Because they knew, the more emotion they elicited from the victims the more chance they had of attracting Emily.

Already all the victims were bleeding profusely from numerous cuts and bites. One of the Bloodwraiths leaned down, ripped the secretary's ear off and spun it across the room like a miniature Frisbee.

The other vamps laughed and there was a smattering of applause.

'I wonder if you can do that with a nose?' Asked one of the vamps as he grasped the tour guides head and tilted it back. He reached down…

And the front door exploded.

There was a blur of movement and a spray of blood as the nose-threatening vampire was smashed against the far wall some twenty feet away, turning his head into a pulpy mash.

Deathwalker the axe appeared in Em's right hand and a tornado of wind started up as she spun around the circle, hacking and cutting.

But these were no ordinary vamps. These were Bloodwraiths. The best of the best. And where Deathwalker would have beheaded a normal vamp, a Bloodwraith had already moved, so instead of a killing blow the axe delivered a heavy injury. Arms were lopped off, ribs sliced open and jaws hacked off faces.

Troy Wolfman leaped over the circle of death and attacked the Nightwalker and his three bodyguards, dispatching two of the Bloodwraiths in under half a second. Then the Nightwalker and the remaining Bloodwraith were on him, hacking and slashing with their extended talons. Troy kept moving, remembering Bastian's training. Dancing, leaping and rolling constantly.

But these two were good and Troy was taking big hits. Blood streamed from multiple deep gashes in his flesh. His left wrist was broken and his ribs shone dully through the deep rents in his torso.

But as he fought he rejuvenated. Flesh and bone knitting back together. However, it was taking its toll, pushing the Wolfman to the very edge of his limits. Exhausting him utterly.

He managed to get behind the Bloodwraith and, with a savage twist of his neck, he tore his head off. Then the Daywalker struck him. Troy flew through the air and crashed into the wall. Loose bricks and mortar fell down on him as he slumped to the floor. Never before had he fought anything so powerful. So fast. So unbelievably strong.

But he was Alpha. He was Pack. Troy threw back his head and howled. I am Pack. This is my territory. Beware.

Troy changed from his Wolfman mode and went full wolf. Atavistic and primal. An animal protecting his own. Primitive, pure and unique. The essence of the Pack.

The Daywalker fought back as best he could but he was no match for the Alpha. The protector.

Within seconds there was not enough vampire left intact in order to heal or rejuvenate.

Troy bound over to Emily to find that she had dispatched all the other Bloodwraiths. Her axe was still in her hand. Oddly, the innocent tourists were not moving. They simply sat on the floor, their faces blank. No fear. No emotion. Nothing. Troy tilted his head to one side and sniffed at them.

'I glamoured them,' said Em as she saw the quizzical look on the wolf's face. 'I'll wipe their memories of the worst just before we go.'

The Alpha morphed back into Wolfman mode. 'Outside,' he gasped as he fought against the pain that was consuming his body. 'There are vamps more outside.'

As he spoke, three more Bloodwraiths ran in, their movements so fast as to appear like stop-motion photography. One instant they were at the door and the next millisecond they were next to Emily.

Troy tensed his muscles, ready to fight. But there was no need. Emily's axe blurred and two Bloodwraiths dropped, headless to the floor. Then she punched the third one on the side of his face and his head literally exploded from the impact.

Troy blinked in amazement. Four of them had almost killed him and Em had taken almost that many down in less than a second.

She grinned at him. 'It's a flaw in their training,' she said. 'They're fast and all that, but as soon as they saw that I was just as fast, they tend to anticipate. So all that I do is start a movement and then stop and attack from a slightly different angle. It throws them completely. They just cannot stop their initial reaction in time, given that it all happens on microseconds.'

Troy laughed, changing back to human form as he did so. 'That was just a very convoluted way of saying that you are much faster than

them,' he said.

Em nodded. 'I was trying not to sound too arrogant.'

Troy smiled and then pitched forward as his injuries overcame him.

Emily rushed over and caught him, holding him tight against her to stop him falling to the floor.

'You're naked,' she said. 'Again.'

'I know,' whispered Troy.

And he kissed her.

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Chapter 29

Nathan shook with fury. Next to him the dying body of a Bloodwraith lay twitching, throat torn open and limbs broken. In a fit of pique, the *Capo* had killed the messenger for bringing bad news.

The Nightwalker, Bartholomew, stood at the door and avoided the *Capo's* eyes while he waited for him to calm down.

Finally Nathan spoke, his voice quivering with rage. 'Talk to me, Bartholomew. You checked the place out, what happened?'

'By the time that I got there, *Capo*, the area had been cleared. But there was still enough evidence to put the puzzle together.'

'Good, had the girl been there?'

'She had been seen heading for the building so, yes, we must assume that she was.'

'And how many wolves with her?' Enquired Nathan. 'Ten? Twenty?'

Bartholomew took a deep breath and then cleared his throat.

'Do not be nervous,' commanded Nathan. 'Tell me the truth.'

'One, my *Capo*.'

Nathan screeched loud and long. The picture windows shivered and two light bulbs popped, such was the amplitude and pitch. 'One?'

'Yes, *Capo*,' affirmed the Nightwalker. 'Judging from the blood spatter and marks on the walls and floor, there was the girl and a single wolf. From what I can deduce, the girl killed most of the brethren. The wolf took care of four, including the Nightwalker, Carl.'

'Impossible,' muttered Nathan.

'What, *Capo*?' Asked Bartholomew.

'Both,' snapped the *Capo*. 'A wolf cannot beat three Bloodwraiths, and a Nightwalker. They are the very best of the best. And for the girl to have single-handedly brought the true death to another thirteen of our most gifted warriors. I simply cannot…no, I will not believe it. What about the other two teams? At least they must have slaughtered the wolves that came for them.'

Bartholomew shook his head. 'Sorry, *Capo*,' he answered. 'The wolves never came. They must have suspected that it was some sort of trap.'

'If they knew, then the girl must have known,' said Nathan. 'That means that she was confident enough to walk into the lion's den knowing that she could defeat the lion.' He looked up at

Bartholomew, his eyes bright red with anger. ‘What say you? The truth.’

‘I agree, my *Capo*,’ answered Bartholomew. ‘She has become a force to be reckoned with. As has the wolf that she was with. We must assume that the wolf was special. If all of them were as powerful as that one then they would have simply sprung all of the traps.’

Nathan nodded. ‘True. Well done. So, if we can take out the girl and the single wolf then I feel that we shall have little to worry about.’

Nathan walked to the window and looked out at the night. ‘Bartholomew. Go and fetch me some humans. Ten. Anyone will do but make sure that no one sees them. Take them to that room that Mister Stopes used to use to interrogate people.’

‘As you command, *Capo*,’ said Bartholomew. ‘May I ask why?’

‘Yes,’ acceded Nathan. ‘I need them because I’d like to make a collect call to someone who might be able to help us out.’

***

The room stank. Four of the people that Bartholomew had found were homeless vagrants that hadn’t seen a bathroom for many years. Two were street prostitutes, and the others were made up of two tourists a young girl and an itinerant salesman.

Nathan ordered Bartholomew from the room and locked the door. Then he turned and faced the group, stilling them with his coercion as he did so.

‘Normally I would have a bit of fun with you all,’ he said to them. ‘But unfortunately this is business.’ He shook his head and sniggered. ‘All work and no play makes Nathan a very dull boy.’ His fangs and talons extended, and he walked up to the first homeless man. ‘Time to die,’ he whispered as he drew his talons across the man’s neck, severing his carotid artery. The man sank to the floor, shivering slightly with reaction as his life’s blood drained away.

‘Morrigan,’ called Nathan. ‘I need you.’

He moved on to the next man and repeated the procedure, calling out for the goddess of war once again.

Slowly he moved down the line, killing and calling. Entreating. Offering his sacrifices to the entity known as Morgana and Morgan la Fey and Macha and Nemaine.

To the goddess known as, The Morrigan.

And just before he got to the young girl who was the last in the line, a blue light appeared in the room, flickering and pulsating before it metamorphosed into a huge crow and then, finally, a beautiful woman.

‘You came,’ said Nathan.

‘I could not refuse the blood sacrifice,’ answered The Morrigan.

‘Oh well, looks like I don’t need you,’ said Nathan to the young girl. ‘Would you like to leave?’

The girl nodded, her face drawn but relieved at her unbelievable good fortune.

Nathan laughed. ‘As if.’ He ripped her throat open and drank deeply before dropping her corpse onto the floor. ‘Sorry,’ he apologized to the goddess. ‘Hungry. Come, let us leave this charnel house and talk in the withdrawing room.’

The two of them left and headed for the open plan lounge with its views over the park. ‘May I offer you some sustenance?’ Enquired Nathan.

The Morrigan shook her head.

‘I have some particularly good red wine,’ continued the *Capo*. ‘Chateau Margaux 1787. Two hundred and sixty years old. Also Cognac. A lovely Massougnes 1805. I recommend it most highly.’

‘The Napoleonic Wars,’ said The Morrigan. ‘1805, the Battle of Trafalgar.’ Her eyes misted over with memories and her lips twitched. A tiny hint of a smile. ‘I believe I shall take you up on that offer, Nathan,’ she said. ‘It was a good year. I remember it well.’

The Capo snapped his fingers and, with vampire enhanced speed, Bartholomew appeared beside The Morrigan and offered her a crystal brandy balloon with a large measure of the two hundred and twelve year old spirit.

She held it to her nose and inhaled the flavor. Smoky, sweet and earthy. The memory of cannon fire, musket smoke and screaming horses. Of men crying out in agony. The triumphant cheers of the British sailors as they bested the combined might of the Spanish and French navies. The deaths of almost seven million people. Good times they were. Oh how she missed them. How she yearned for war once again. But a war centered on her and her beliefs. A genuine war in the old style. Not one of these modern wars carried out by drone and aircraft and diplomacy. And you got little more genuine than the ancient battle between Vampire and Humanity. The age old struggle between Good and Evil.

With a flick of her wrist she downed the rest of the cognac. ‘Right then,’ she said. ‘Why did you call me?’

So Nathan told her about Emily and her wolf. How the girl had bested thirteen of his top warriors with relative ease. And how the wolf had done the same to one of his Nightwalkers.

‘She has become exponentially more powerful than before,’ said Nathan. ‘I must be honest. It is a worry.’

‘You only have yourself to blame,’ pointed out The Morrigan. ‘What were you thinking? Turning her into a vampire.’

‘I never thought that they would permit her to live,’ argued Nathan.

‘I was punishing her.’

The Morrigan shook her head. ‘I have no idea why you are so obsessed with that girl. After all, she wasn’t that big a problem before you turned her.’

‘She was,’ snapped Nathan. ‘Things were fine until she came along. With her superior attitude and her long blonde hair and red dresses. Flaunting herself for Sir William like a tart.’

The Morrigan said nothing. After all, what could one say to a man who had over a century of bitterness and jealousy locked into his very soul? A man who had allowed the poisons of envy and animosity to fester and breed instead of using his time to grow and nurture his inherent goodness. Humans were so fickle. So short sighted.

Finally the goddess spoke. ‘I can help,’ she said. ‘Give me a week. I shall return when I am ready.’

Nathan went down on one knee. ‘Thank you, Goddess.’

‘I’m not doing this for you,’ sneered The Morrigan as she shifted back into the guise of a giant crow. ‘I’m doing it for me.’

And with a flash of blue she disappeared.

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Chapter 30

'*Etalol ita sequitur est quodo reperio sequi* Morrigan,' shouted Merlin as he let the spell go.

Red and yellow light flared in the room and the air filled with an ochre-colored smoke.

'Reperio sequi Morrigan*,'* repeated the Prof as he swung a silver thurible about him, spreading thick clouds of purple incense.

Slowly the ochre smoke dissipated and then, when only the purple smoke from the thurible was visible, both Merlin, and the Prof commanded together.

'*Quaerere*...seek.'

A soundless explosion of blue light filled the room and then all the smoke was gone. The room was clear, smelling faintly of ozone.

Both men looked like they had just run a marathon. Sweat dripped from their faces and their clothes were wet enough to wring. They were both breathing heavily and the Prof's right arm was actually trembling from the effort.

They left the room and headed for the kitchen to get something to quench their thirst.

William was sitting at the table, having come back from London for the day to check up on the forest getaway. In front of him was a huge pile of barely cooked steak. He was eating with his hands.

'Hey,' he greeted. 'What's with the exhausted looks?'

'We've been putting a spell together over the last few days and it's been rather taxing to say the least,' answered Merlin.

'Why?' Questioned William. 'Big one? What was it for?'

'No, no,' said the Prof. 'Not at all. Small it was. Almost infinitesimally small. You see, it had to be so tiny so as not to be detected by the recipient.'

Merlin gave the Prof a stern look and the old Boggart stuttered to silence.

'Yes,' mumbled the Prof. 'Most small. Tea? Anyone? Unfortunately Tag is not here to make us some of his splendid brew but I shall endeavor to do it justice.'

William laughed. 'Good God, how did that happen?'

'What?' Asked Merlin.

'Tag's tea,' answered William. 'How did that become our drink of choice? I don't even know how he makes it. Sweet, overpowering,

tastes like no other tea ever. And now it's our beverage of choice. The first time I tasted it I had to force it down. Now it's like a drug, I actually crave it.'

'Me too,' admitted the Prof

'And I,' added Merlin

There was a long pause and then Merlin spoke. 'Actually, what the hell does he put in that brew of his? I reckon that maybe we need to find out.'

***

The Morrigan flared into being in her cottage, assuming the guise of an old woman, a form that she was most comfortable with.

She lifted a flagstone from the floor and took out a small silver box. The box was unadorned, plain and solid with no discernable keyhole or lid.

Then she fetched an old bone-carved key from a secret compartment in her wall, above her fireplace. As she placed the key near to the box, a keyhole appeared. She inserted the bone-carved key and turned. Another keyhole appeared next to the first.

She took a small iron key that was hanging from her necklace and inserted that. A third keyhole opened.

She chanted a phrase in a guttural language, moving her hands in the air to trace an intricate pattern as she did so. And a third key materialized in her hand. This one was made of ice and she inserted it and turned quickly before it melted.

A line appeared to reveal a lid which then sprang open to expose the contents.

There were three items. Items of such magical power and rarity that they warranted the rigmarole of opening that the Morrigan had just gone through.

A single dragon scale, like a piece of solid rainbow some two inches square.

A clipping from a fairy's wing.

And about three inches of frayed, sturdy rope. She took the rope out and concealed it in her robes before closing the lid and returning the magical box to its hiding place.

This piece of rope was a cutting from the god Poseidon's net and, as such, when even a tiny piece was cast into a weapon it could capture and hold the strongest opponent. At least for a short while. Long enough to physically bind them.

With a blast of light the Morrigan was gone.

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Chapter 31

To not fear someone who could defeat almost twenty Bloodwraiths with ease would be the act of a stupid lunatic.

And although even Nathan would admit that mentally he may be a bit different – he was far from stupid.

So he had decided to move his England HQ to a more defensible spot. A place where Emily would not be able to waltz in unannounced and rip his head off. Not that he considered himself to be a lesser warrior than her but it paid to be prudent. After all, what good was immortality if some slip of a girl came along and ruined it all by turning you into a pile of hamburger?

Once again the *Capo* was amazed at just how much one could achieve in a short space of time if money was literally no object. Especially when the offer of wealth was backed up by a show of fangs and the promise of a long painful death.

Nathan had contacted the CEO of a major building and contacting company, offered him over twenty million to do a job that would normally cost less than five. Then he had explained the time constraints involved. *Id est*, he wanted it done by yesterday. And, finally, he had provided and extra incentive by tearing the man's secretary to shreds in front of him and then promising the same would happen to him, his family, his friends and even his casual acquaintances if the job was not completed on time.

Months of work became days and Nathan was now ensconced in his own private maximum security fortress situated in an industrial complex on the Isle of Dogs in the London docklands, opposite the Greenwich Dock. High fencing, infrared alarms and CCTV. A double fence system filled with guard dogs. Nathan was under no illusion that the dogs would slow a wolf down, however, they were there to alert the brethren to a wolfs presence, not to defend them in any way. Because a dog will go apoplectic with fear whenever a werewolf gets within a thousand yards of it.

On top of that there were subtle guard towers every hundred feet. They looked like mere observation posts but each one held a human sniper. They were the very best mercenaries that money could buy.

The central warehouse had been converted into an uber-luxury living space for the Capo.

Industrial loft chic.

But many of the rooms were empty, and many corridors led to dead ends. Some corridors were even booby-trapped with silver-shot claymore mines attached to trip wires. A veritable maze of death. A nightmare for any attacking force that managed to get inside the perimeter.

Not that Nathan envisaged that happening. The place was totally impenetrable.

'Ha,' he said to himself as he stood alone in his private rooms. 'Let's see you get through that security.'

'Beware of overconfidence,' observed a voice behind him.

Nathan literally jumped six feet into the air as he spun around. 'Shit,' he cussed. 'How the hell did you get in here?'

The Morrigan sat in one of the wing back chairs, a vague look of amusement on her face. 'I'm a god. I go where I want.'

'But how did you even know where I was?'

'We have a link. From now on I will always know where you are.'

A look of consternation flashed across Nathan's face.

The Morrigan shook her head. 'The answer to what you are thinking is, no. Emily cannot find you, nor can she enter the way that I do. So you can rest easy in your prison.'

'It's not a prison,' snapped Nathan. 'It's a fortress. And how did you know what I was thinking?'

The Morrigan sighed. 'What part of, "*I Am I God"* did you not understand? Really, Nathan, stop being so obtuse.'

'Fair enough,' conceded the head vampire. 'Why are you here?'

The Morrigan held out the small piece of rope, offering it to Nathan.

The vampire looked puzzled. 'Is this some sort of binding ritual?' He asked. 'Is the rope symbolic of something? Because I'm not sure how intimate I would like us to become. After all, I owe you…but I do not worship you.'

The Morrigan rolled her eyes. 'True worship cannot be compelled,' she said. 'You, of all people, should know that. No, this is not symbolic. It is actual.'

'An actual piece of rope.'

'Not any old rope,' said The Morrigan. 'This is a piece of Poseidon's net.'

'I thought that Poseidon carried a trident.'

'He does. But he often fought with Zeus, attempting to usurp his throne. However Zeus was too powerful. So Poseidon called upon Hephaestus, the Greek god of the forge, fire, and volcanoes and he asked him to make him a net of gold. A net that would be powerful enough to negate Zeus' magic and render him helpless. This is part of that net.'

'It's not gold,' noted Nathan.

‘Obviously,’ admitted The Morrigan. ‘It never was. But a normal rope net would be far too prosaic for the myths and legends. Trust me, this rope is from the actual net.’

Nathan nodded. ‘I see. Very impressive, I’m sure. But how does that pertain to me?’

The Morrigan teased a single fiber from the piece of rope. ‘A tiny part, even one as small as this, still has the power of the whole. The magic imbued within, enables every fraction to still be capable of capturing ones opponent.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Nathan. ‘I’m not getting it.’

The Morrigan sighed. ‘Put simply, the net itself was just a net. No more or less capable of ensuring Zeus than any other net. However, the powerful binding spells that Hephaestus imbued the rope with made it possible to catch a god. In other words, if you took this piece of fiber and cast it into the blade of a sword or the head of a bullet and then cut, or shot Emily Shadowhunter with it, it would bind her. It would negate her power. Render her helpless. Like she had been drugged. For a time at least.’

‘How long?’

The Morrigan shrugged. ‘Not sure how powerful she is. But long enough to allow you to put additional restraints on her. Titanium shackles, silver chains. That type of thing.’

‘What if I wove that fiber into another net or a rope?’ Asked Nathan. ‘Would that bind her as well?’

‘Definitely,’ concurred The Morrigan. ‘However, I would suggest a ranged weapon like a rifle. That way you could take her out from a safe distance.’

‘How much would I need in each projectile?’

‘Theoretically, the tiniest piece would do it. But to be safe I would say an inch long piece of fiber.’

The Morrigan stripped a few more pieces from the rope and handed them to Nathan. ‘That should give you enough for thirty rounds of ammunition. Use it wisely, it is irreplaceable.’

Nathan took the strands and peered at them closely. ‘So I shoot her with some of this and then what?’

‘She should go into a coma. Freeze. Fall over. I’m not sure; all I know is that it will stop her. Anything designed to stop Zeus can stop anything. What’s wrong? You don’t seem that impressed.’

‘Oh, I am,’ countered Nathan. ‘It’s just that I’m wondering how to find her. She won’t fall for the same trick twice and for this to work I’m going to have to set up quite a sophisticated ambush. Snipers, bait, a good field of fire, easy access and an area that suits us more than them. I honestly see no way that I can do that.’

The Morrigan scowled. ‘I can help with that,’ she admitted

begrudgingly.

And she told Nathan about the Gargoyle guardians and how they were being used as spotters and lookouts.

‘But not all Gargoyles,’ she finished. ‘Only the very few sentient ones. So to take advantage of the knowledge you shall have to do some very subtle reconnoitering first, find out where some guardians are and then work it back from there until you have your perfect battleground.’

Nathan’s eyes flashed with anger. ‘Don’t you think that this is something that you could have told me before? I have lost many brethren due to my ignorance of this fact.’

The Morrigan stood up. Blue light coruscated around her and she seemed to grow in stature. ‘I am not your servant, Nathan Tremblay. I am not yours to command. Neither am I your ally.’

‘Granted,’ admitted the vampire. ‘But we are, at very least, partners.’

The Morrigan shook her head in denial. ‘We are not even acquaintances. In fact, I despise you and your Brethren. Leeches and destroyers the lot of you.

But as I said before, I am the goddess of war. Em and William and Merlin and their ilk would have peace for all. As it is, in the modern world I have very few worshippers. Humanity has embraced technological war. War without honor. No longer are a thousand ships launched over passion and lust. Now wars are fought over oil and political expediencies. Over distances by missiles or by skulking cowards using IED’s. I need a war fought between personal protagonists like those of old. Man against man. A war of passion. An honorable war.

But this war, a war between humanity and the *Nosferatu*. This will be a war where I shall become known again. From that will stem great power. I could once again become what I was. A god, feared by many, worshiped by all warriors. Only a short while ago I went to the other gods for help. To help the humans. But they turned me down. What was the point they asked? I argued. But now, after much thought, I see their position.’

Nathan nodded, he understood the draw of power. He knew its heady feel. It's addictive qualities.

The Morrigan morphed and disappeared. A sneer on her lips.

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Chapter 32

Sir Jasper assumed the stance of headmaster. Or perhaps Victorian era father. Legs apart, hands behind his back and eyeglasses perched halfway down his nose. On his face an expression of supercilious authority. It was time to put the proverbial foot down and the knight of the realm was about to do so.

'Let me tell you something, William,' he started. 'Here, in the United Kingdom, at the height of the Cold War, back in the late sixties, early seventies it was estimated that there were approximately eighty to one hundred Russian spies at any one given time. Some attached to the Embassy, some deep undercover and some double agents. However, the KGB was never actually the omnipotent bogeyman that everyone thinks that it was. In fact, most of the Russian spies were well compromised, and we knew about them. We obviously tried to turn as many as we could. Those who couldn't be turned met with terminal accidents. I believe as many as ten a month. Sometimes as high as thirty. You see, people forget that the Cold War was an actual war, albeit clandestine.'

William shifted in his seat. Sir Jasper had insisted that he come to this meeting and now the old plodder was babbling on about the Cold War. The Omega wondered when he was going to get to the point as he glanced surreptitiously at his Rolex.

'We managed to cover up those murders without the public ever suspecting a thing,' continued the head of Scotland Yard. 'Now, however, things have gotten out of hand. Ten, twenty a month is easy to handle. But ten or twenty bodies a night? In the age of the internet and CCTV – well, quite frankly it is unsustainable and I'm amazed that the press hasn't caught on to it yet.'

Sir Jasper turned to fix William with his sternest glare. 'So I am afraid that, as of right now, your silly games simply have to stop. It's over.'

'What about the crime figures?' Asked William.

'Not important, old chap.'

'Bullshit,' snapped William. 'It's very important.'

'No it is not,' insisted Jasper. 'Because that is not what you lot are involved in. You are not crime fighters. Policemen. Bringers of justice. No. You are merely glorified Ghost Busters. Vampire hunters. So stop pretending that you are doing this for the common good. You are

doing it for your own means, whatever they may be. And quite frankly, I'm getting tired of taking the political fallout for you and your nefarious ambitions.'

William sat for a few seconds without moving. Controlling his breathing, willing himself to remain human. Then he spoke. 'How dare you?' He asked, his voice barely above a whisper. 'You weak, pencil pushing pathetic politician. Your irrelevant crime figures are down by over seventy percent. But you might be correct. Maybe that is irrelevant. So let's talk about the common good.

Have you ever confronted a vampire? Not Emily, she is a saint. I mean an actual, blood-sucking, murdering, soulless creature of the night? No, of course not. They are like a deadly virus, Jasper. And without someone controlling them they will spread unchecked throughout the whole world like the worst contagion imaginable. The black plague, the Great Influenza Pandemic. Together those two incidents killed over one hundred million people. Now imagine that virus as an intelligent, conniving megalomaniacal entity. Imagine it as an enemy that saw humanity as mere cattle. Or worse. As mere food. At least cattle are treated relatively humanely. And you dare to say that we do not work for the common good.

Jasper – this is the last time that you will call me to your office. The very last time. If I decide that we need to speak then I shall contact you. And you will continue to clear up whenever we tell you to. Remember, I do not need your permission. We have been fighting this fight for thousands of years. Thousands. We have sacrificed all. Now bear that in mind when you next sleep peacefully at night. When you roam the streets of London at will. When you breathe and eat and play, you do so because of us.

This isn't some sort of political power-game. Man up, for god's sake, Jasper. Man up and do the right thing.'

***

'It's our turn,' said Bastian. 'You let Troy run with you but never us. So tonight Sylvian and I are tagging along.'

'It's not a social outing,' argued Em.

'Why not?' Asked the Bloodborn. 'It could be if we allow it to be. Tell you what, why don't we take in a few sights, the London Eye, Tower Bridge, The Palace. Then later we'll stop in at the opera Terrace in Covent Garden for a drink. Maybe a late night dinner at Porters.'

Emily sighed and then smiled. It was obvious that whatever she said the boys would always find some excuse to accompany her. And she admitted to herself that to refuse would be churlish about. And dinner at Porters, the famous pie shop near to Covent Garden, sounded like fun. 'Okay,' she acquiesced. 'But just you two. Let's not turn this into

some sort of traveling circus.'

As always they left via the side windows and climbed onto the roof.

And only a few miles away, within sight of the Gargoyles on the roof of the Natural History Museum, a group of three vampires readied themselves. They were in a dark blue Mercedes Benz and were waiting for the signal that they expected around eleven o'clock. When they got the word, they were to single out a couple of victims and drag them into the receiving area behind the museum. Invisible to all but the Gargoyle guardians that they had ascertained were on the roof of the said museum.

And on other roofs close to the museum lay three other vampires. All of them accomplished snipers. They had been lying there for two days now, having snuck in under cover of darkness, using utmost stealth so as not to be spotted by the guardians. Each was armed with a L115A3 sniper rifle that used the 8.95mm round fed via a five round box magazine. And every sniper had two full boxes of ammunition. But this was not normal ammunition. Every slug had been hand cast and polished, and in each casting lay a single three inch coiled strand of fiber taken from Poseidon's net.

Also, secreted in various apartments, underground parking lots and public conveniences' situated close to the museum, waited another thirty Bloodwraiths and three Nightwalkers. The Nightwalkers were in a single group together and with them they carried a long length of sturdy rope. And although it looked normal, it was far from it. Nathan had got one of his craftsmen to incorporate two strands of Poseidon's net into the weft of the rope turning a normal household item into something that would be capable of restraining Emily Shadowhunter on a permanent basis. A binding that even she would be incapable of breaking out of.

On top of all of this, Nathan had ensured that a few fast cars were waiting close by and, at the London airport in the docks, a private jet stood fueled and on standby. Because once they had captured Emily they were to take her to the jet and fly her to the headquarters in Italy. To *Castel Gandolfino*, the formal residence of the ex-*Capo di tutti capi*, Janus Augusta. Here she would be deep in enemy territory and there would be no chance of the Pack finding her let alone rescuing her.

Then the fun would begin. Then she would pay.

And now, the perfect trap waited to be sprung.

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Chapter 33

This was most definitely the best day of Mary's life. Who would have thought that at the relatively advanced age of fifty-two she would finally find love? And, considering her strict Roman Catholic upbringing, her fanatically strict parents and the fact that her local parish Priest seemed to think that literally everything was a sin – it was even more amazing that the love of her life would turn out to be a middle-aged woman called Petunia Johnston.

God, her parents would have turned in their graves.

She and Petunia caught the coach from Canterbury that morning, booked into a hotel near the Natural History Museum and then spent the day with over two thousand like-minded people, joining in a march on parliament demanding that the Anglican Church allow gay marriage. They had waved their "Hate Won't Stop Us" placards, they had sung songs, and they had danced in the streets. Later they had joined a great group of people at 'Compton's of SOHO' and swapped stories and drunk too much until around half past ten when Petunia suddenly went down on one knee and proposed to her.

Everyone had cheered and laughed and cried and they had brought a last round of drinks and then decided to head back to their hotel for a little private celebrating.

They had just walked past the entrance to the museum when a car pulled up next to them. The doors opened and the next thing that they knew they were sitting in the car. Both of them had a severe case of whiplash and their bodies felt as though they had gone through a three minute round with Mike Tyson. This was because the human body is not designed to move or accelerate at the implausible speeds that the *Nosferatu* work at and, as such, when they had gone from standing to moving at over fifty meters per second there had been obvious skeletal and muscular trauma.

The Bloodwraiths didn't care. Their only brief had been to select, kidnap and deliver the chosen ones alive to the receiving area behind the museum.

This they did.

The Mercedes stopped outside the gated and walled receiving area and the Bloodwraiths simply picked the two women up and threw them over the fifteen foot wall. On the other side they were expertly fielded and caught by another group of bloodsuckers.

At this stage both Mary and Petunia were simply too shocked and traumatized to be afraid. Adrenalin had momentarily wiped out fear. A state that was soon to be remedied.

Bloodwraith Martin Thomas stood above the two women and extended his fangs. Petunia stood up and moved in front of Mary, raising her arms protectively as if to ward off the vampire.

Martin laughed, and he reached forward, grabbed Petunia's right index finger…and pulled it off like he was plucking a ripe fruit from a vine. The other two Bloodwraiths laughed with him. They loved it when the food fought back.

Martin had received no particular instructions from the *Capo*. His leader had simply conveyed to him that he should invoke fear and pain in equal measures but to keep the victims alive until the girl and her wolf, or wolves, arrived. From then on in it was simple. Kill whoever was with the girl and let the snipers take the girl out. When she had been incapacitated, throw her over the wall so that she could be evacuated.

It was obvious to Martin that the woman who had stood up was the dominant of the two so he decided that he would inflict a little more pain on her as this would definitely invoke more terror from the other. With that in mind he grabbed her by her face and dragged her close to him, exposing her neck so that he could sink his fangs in and feed.

The sitting woman went apoplectic with terror.

Martin stopped before he killed his victim and then, using his razor sharp talons, he cut her blouse from her body, exposing her naked flesh. Then he started to do the same to her skin, literally flaying it from her body.

There was an explosion of movement in the air and Martin's head ceased to exist. Disappearing in a red mist as Emily's fist impacted with it at a speed that was substantially above that of the speed of sound. Petunia fell to the floor next to her partner.

Moments later two more beings leapt from the roof into the receiving yard. Neither of the newcomers were wolves.

But before they could do anything, Em had dispatched the last two vampires by simply slamming them into the walls so hard that they became mere sacks of broken bone and flesh.

Emily knelt down next to the two women. 'Don't worry,' she said. 'You're safe now.'

But as she spoke the first sniper round impacted, striking her under her right shoulder blade. The heavyweight 8.95mm lead rounds had been doctored so that they expanded on impact, mushrooming in size so that they didn't exit the body. Staying inside in order to impart their binding magic to the victim.

Emily grunted and fell forward.

‘Sniper,’ shouted Sylvian.

There was another meaty thud as a second round struck Emily in the side of her torsos. Then a third impact.

And the Bloodwraiths came pouring over the walls. Ten, twenty, thirty of them.

Sylvian drew his rapier and Bastian drew both his short and long swords.

‘Damn,’ cussed Bastian. ‘We’ve been suckered.’

‘I agree,’ said Sylvian. ‘But not to worry. As soon as Emily recovers, I feel that we shall comfortably outnumber them.’

As he spoke Emily stood up. She looked slightly unsteady but then grimaced and set herself. Deathwalker appeared in her right hand. ‘Try to shoot me, will you?’ She sneered. ‘Well we shall see about that.’

She stepped forward but as she did so another three rounds hammered into her almost simultaneously. Then another. She stopped walking and Deathwalker shimmered in her hand and then disappeared.

Faintly, with a look of utter amazement on her face, she pitched forward and fell to the floor. Her eyes were open and she could hear and feel, but she was completely paralyzed except for the ability to move her eyes and see what was transpiring around her.

The pack of Bloodwraiths fell on Sylvian and Bastian like a tsunami and all that Em could do was watch.

Bastian blurred into motion, weaving one movement into the next, both swords spinning so fast as to create a whirling wall of silver. Anything that came into contact with the blades was instantly severed or deeply cut. Blood sprayed and limbs and pieces of flesh were scattered about like wood from a wood-chipper.

Sylvian chose the aerial route, somersaulting over his adversaries and striking at them from the apex of each leap. Stabbing into their necks and twisting savagely as he spun.

One of the Bloodwraiths hooked his talons into Bastian as the Jamaican spun out of one of his moves, slicing deeply into his calf and almost tearing the muscle from the bone. He staggered and fell and the rest of the Bloodwraiths were onto him, ripping and slicing at him as he tried to roll away, hacking back at them with both of his swords.

And then one of them tore his right arm off. He fell next to Emily and all that she could do was stare blankly into his eyes as he died.

Just before they slashed his neck open he smiled at Emily and whispered. ‘Be strong.’

Then he was gone. And Em couldn’t even call out his name.

Sylvian vaulted over the circle of Bloodwraiths that surround Em and hacked off two of their heads. But then the report of the snipers

rifles rang out and two slugs smashed into the Bloodborn's chest. He sank to his knees beside Emily and his rapier slid from his nerveless fingers as the magic took control of him, dulling his senses and stilling his body.

Around him and Bastian and Emily lay the dismembered corpses of fifteen Bloodwraiths.

Martin walked up to the Bloodborn and stared down at him. 'So,' he said. 'You are the infamous Bloodborn Count.'

'Oui,' admitted Sylvian. 'I am le grand duc de Bourgogne, Sylvian Baptiste, Ordre des chevaliers du Saint-Esprit. And I have been responsible for sending over two thousand of your brothers to the true death.'

'And now it is time for you to die,' said Martin.

Sylvian shrugged. 'We all die.' He turned to Emily. 'I am sorry, mon cher,' he said. 'We have failed you.'

Martin picked up Sylvian's rapier and placed it in the Bloodborn's loose grasp. 'A man should die with his sword,' he said.

Sylvian nodded. 'Thank you.'

And Emily felt his blood pour over her as the Bloodwraith took his head off.

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Chapter 34

The Morrigan flickered into existence in the kitchen, opposite the seated figures of Merlin, the Prof and William. She arrived in the guise of the crow and morphed into a beautiful woman in a clinging silk dress.

'How dare you?' She hissed as he landed, her eyes blazing with fury.

'I dare to do as I want,' answered Merlin. 'I dare to do what I feel is the correct thing to do.'

'You used a summoning spell on me,' shouted the Morrigan. 'Like some common demon.'

'I called you in a civil manner but you ignored me.'

'I am a goddess,' snapped the Morrigan. 'I am not at your beck and call.'

'And I am Merlin,' roared the magician as he stood up. 'I am The Wild Man of the Woods. The last of the Druids, the keeper of all knowledge. The son of Satan and the right hand of the Lord. And you, Morgan la Fay, now stand in my thrall, you can attempt to escape but I have bound you to me. You have questions to answer.'

'I stand in no one's thrall, Merlin,' she answered. 'Especially not a mortal human being.' With a dramatic flare of blue light she attempted to translocate herself. But naught happened as her magic merely stuttered and coruscated around her. She was trapped.

Merlin laughed dryly. An expression of certainty rather than amusement. 'Morgan,' he said. 'I may be many things but I rather feel that the monikers, mortal and human are no longer part of my lexicon. I left both of those definitions behind many, many centuries ago. But it seems as though you still carry the moniker of traitor. You brought about the fall of the hero, Cúchulainn by lies and deception; you conspired in the fall of Queen Odras. Your meddling helped the Tuatha Dé drive the Formorians into the sea and your duplicity saw the demise of the great King Arthur. And all these times I simply stood by, believing that the will of the gods should not be proscribed by the will of man.

Well, no more. We cast a search spell on you, so do not deny that you have been fraternizing with the enemy. With the creatures of the night.'

'Impossible,' argued the Morrigan. 'I would have felt such a spell.'

The Prof shook his head. ‘Oh no, it was small, you see. Infinitesimally small. Far too small for you to detect.’

‘Oh, shut up, you useless old Boggart,’ snapped the Morrigan. ‘Anyway, so what? I am a goddess, I do and go where I please.’

‘No,’ said Merlin, sadly. ‘I can no longer allow that. You stir up trouble for your own selfish means. You demand war and worship. Two characteristics that should never be coupled together. You care for nothing but your own power.’

‘Untrue,’ argued the Morrigan. ‘I went to the gods to ask for their help to fight against the *Nosferatu*.’

‘And so you did,’ agreed Merlin. ‘But that was not to protect humanity. You merely wanted a war and the more beings involved in it the better for you. The more chance you had of gaining worshipers. Of increasing you power. Tell me, Morgan,’ continued Merlin. ‘What have you told the *Nosferatu*? How have you helped them? And bear in mind, if you do not answer, I have you in my thrall and I can force you. We both know that will prove to be most painful and I hoped that we could avoid it.’

‘There is no need to threaten,’ said the Morrigan. ‘I will tell, after all, I am not ashamed of what I have done.’

And so she told Merlin of her helping Nathan, from granting him the means to gain leadership of the *Nosferatu* to giving him knowledge of the Gargoyles and, finally, to her gifting him some of Poseidon’s net.

‘Even now,’ she finished. ‘Your precious Emily has most likely been spirited away to a *Nosferatu* stronghold in a place that even I do not know about.’ She smiled. ‘So, you see, Merlin, there is no way out of this war. And that is all that I ask for. War and worship. So, I have won again.’

William got to his feet, strode over to the Morrigan and struck her in the face with his fist, using every ounce of strength that he could muster. Lightning crackled about the room and the air filled with smoke as the goddess staggered back, her lip bleeding. Then she laughed. ‘Really, oh mighty Omega. Is that all that you have? How pathetic. You cannot fight the goddess of war. You are naught to me. Your anger, your strength, your will to do war on me will be reflected back on you tenfold. So cease you pathetic attempts. You cannot harm me.’

‘No,’ admitted Merlin sadly. ‘He cannot. But I can.’ He raised both his arms above his head and started to chant. As his voicing grew stronger and faster the Prof joined in, his chanting a counterpoint to that of the magician.

Sparks snapped and crackled about the room and clouds of noxious smoke appeared at floor level. A ground mist of yellow sulfur. Things

started to materialize in the mist. Tentacles instead of legs and bodies of slime and putrescence. None larger than a household cat. They moved towards the Morrigan, sliding and squelching as they did so. Ovoid faces with no eyes, open maws with no teeth. Nostrils mere holes in their slime covered skulls.

The Morrigan started to keen in terror. 'Please,' she screamed. 'No, Merlin. I do not deserve this.'

They grabbed at her legs, crawling slowly up. Many of them. First ten then twenty. Then hundreds until she was covered in a pile of rotting, writhing creatures that had been dragged up from man's deepest, darkest nightmares.

With a final chant, the creatures started to disappear. And if one looked closely one could see that they were, in fact, being absorbed into the Morrigan's body.

By now the goddess could no longer scream. He voicing's of terror had become a distant whistling of a steam kettle. A child crying softly under its blankets.

Then with a crack of thunder the creatures were gone. And before them stood the Morrigan. But she was no longer human.

William walked over to her and rapped his knuckles on her head.

'You turned her to stone,' he said.

Merlin shook his head. 'No. May the gods forgive me for what I have done.' He turned and left the room, walking slowly and painfully, as if he were only moments from complete collapse.

'I don't understand,' said William to the Prof.

'We did not turn the Morrigan to stone,' explained the Boggart. 'We encased her living body in stone. She is there, still alive, but trapped.'

'And those creatures,' asked William. 'Those slimy, horrible nightmare things?'

'Ah,' answered the Prof. 'Well, they are in there with her. And the stone skin shall keep them there forever. They are the Soul-Destroyers. They feed on your very soul, eating away at the fabric of your existence until there is naught left but an almost empty brain. But they leave the worst memories for you to keep. To re-run, over and over in your head for eternity. Everything that you have ever regretted, every bad deed, every modicum of pain that you have caused to others. Every single one, on a loop. For all eternity. It is a dark punishment. But one that I think she deserved. She has done much wrong.'

'How long will you leave her like that?' Asked William.

The Prof shrugged. 'Who knows? After a hundred years she will be little but a demented shell at any rate. And if Emily has died due to her traitorous deeds…well, let's put it this way. Who the hell cares how long she stays there? I for one couldn't give a toss.'

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Chapter 35

Emily woke up in darkness. Not that it bothered her as she could see just as well in any amount of light. She tried to move, and it didn't take her long to realize that she had been hogtied. A length of rope bound her hands together behind her back, then it ran down to her feet that had also been tied together. For a moment she wondered where she was and how she got there.

Then it all came back to her and a howl of pure anguish was ripped unbidden from her throat.

Bastian was gone.

Sylvian was gone.

She had failed them utterly. They had been there because of her and now, because of her, they were dead.

She struggled against her bonds but could not break them. *It's just rope,* she told herself. *You can break chains of steel, why can't you break this pathetic rope?*

Then she remembered the bullets hitting her. And the lethargy that they had imparted, robbing her of all ability save to lie still and watch her beloved friends die in agony.

Some sort of enchantment, she whispered to herself. *The ropes must be treated with it as well. Well, stuff that.* She put everything she had into breaking free but to no avail. It was as if her arms had been paralyzed. She felt weak. Feeble and useless.

The door opened and light flooded in. Em looked up to see a figure silhouetted in the doorway. As he stepped forward, his features came into focus. It was a stranger. Obviously a vamp but not one that she had ever seen before.

He walked calmly over to her and peered down. 'Ah,' he said. 'Good. You have recovered.' And then he kicked her in the head and burst out laughing.

Emily's head snapped back and smacked into the concrete floor hard enough to crack both the floor and her skull. The pain was momentarily blinding but she could feel herself healing and in seconds she was fine.

He vamp kicked her again. And again, laughing like a hyena as he did so.

Then another walked in. A female. She joined in, hammering her boot into Emily's ribs. Em could hear them cracking and splintering as

the vamp put full effort in.

After a couple of minutes they both stopped. The female lit a cigarette.

Emily raised herself into a sitting position. ‘What are your names?’ She gasped.

‘Why,’ responded the female vamp.

‘So I know what to call you when I kill you,’ said Em.

‘Oh, very tough I’m sure,’ said the female as she kicked Em in the face.

Emily spat out a mouthful of blood and sneered at her. ‘Name,’ she repeated.

The male vamp laughed again. ‘I’m Christopher,’ he said. ‘This is Tangerine.’

‘Tangerine,’ said Emily. ‘That’s not a real name. It’s a fruit.’

The female kicked her again. ‘Hey,’ snapped Em. ‘You better stop doing that or I swear, you’ll die painful instead of quick and easy. Anyway, where am I?’

‘You in the *Castel Gandolfino*,’ answered Christopher. ‘It is the official formal Italian residence of the *Capo di tutti capi*, Nathan Tremblay.’

‘Where is the chief asshole then?’ Enquired Em.

Christopher casually kicked her again. ‘The *Capo* is not here yet. He is still in London. But he will return in three days. And then you will know pain like you have never experienced before. Mothers will keep their children awake at night with stories of how you suffered.’

‘Really?’ Asked Em. ‘What sort of mother did you have? You dick head.’

Both of the bloodsuckers spent the next few minutes hammering Em around the room before they left, closing the door behind them.

She lay there in a pool of blood for a while, waiting for her enhanced body to heal itself and then she dragged herself up into a sitting position and thought.

It didn’t take long to come to the conclusion that she was screwed. If she couldn’t escape before Nathan came back then she was as good as dead. But the rope bound her as tight as an iron maiden and unless one of the ass-wipes that were guarding her actually untied it, then she couldn’t escape. All that she could do was wait for an opportunity to present itself.

As an afterthought she called for her axe, Deathwalker but nothing happed. She tried again, forming a picture of it in her mind and concentrating as hard as she could. Thinking of when she first saw it, imagining the feel of it, the heft and weigh in her hand.

Something flickered at the edge of her consciousness. She let her mind flow, seeking the ethereal thought that hovered just out of her

reach. It was familiar. She almost had it.

'Shadowhunter? Why do you call me back from the valley of shades?'

Emily almost lost her concentration in shock as she heard the voice. 'Lucas?' She questioned. 'Alpha Lucas Cain?'

There was a pause and then the voice answered. 'Yes, I believe that is who I was. It feels right. I believe that I used to be, Alpha Lucas Cain.'

'Who are you now?' Asked Em.

'I am one,' answered the wolf. 'I am many. I am part of the after. And I ask once again, why do you disturb my rest?'

'I'm sorry,' apologized Emily. 'I didn't mean to. I was just thinking. Trying to find a solution. You see, I'm trapped. I've been taken prisoner and unless I get out, then I'm pretty much dead. As to how I contacted you…well, no idea.'

Again there was a long pause. 'I remember,' said Lucas. 'You helped me across the river. You gave me eternal rest. I thank you, Emily Shadowhunter, Guardian and Pack member. How can I help you now?'

'I don't think that you can,' admitted Em. 'Unless you can become corporeal and untie me.'

'No,' said Lucas. 'I exist only in the ethereal. I cannot physically help you. But I do not understand. How do they keep you? I remember that your strength is prodigious. Surely you can simply break free.'

'No can do, Alpha dude,' said Em. 'They've tied me tight with some sort of enchanted rope and I can't wriggle free. Can't even move my arms or legs at all.'

'What if you change? Will the bonds still hold tight?'

'What do you mean?' Asked Em. 'Change?'

'Yes,' affirmed Lucas. 'To your wolf form. Surely then the rope would fall free.'

Em sighed. 'Good plan, alpha,' she said.

'Thank you, guardian.'

'I was being sarcastic,' snapped Emily. 'I'm not a werewolf. I can't change.'

'You are Pack,' insisted Lucas.

'No, not really.'

'You are Pack,' he repeated.

And Emily remembered William telling her the same thing. '*You are Pack,*' he had said to her.

'The Omega said that to me.'

'There you are,' said Lucas, the satisfaction apparent on his voice. 'If the Omega says it is so, then it is so. You are pack, therefore you are wolf. Change and the ropes will fall from you.'

‘How?’ Asked Emily.

‘I cannot explain,’ answered Lucas. ‘That is like asking how to breathe. One just does. There is no how, only do.’

‘Help me.’

‘I can do no more,’ answered Lucas, his voice already fading. ‘Good luck, Emily Shadowhunter, guardian and Pack member. And thank you. My debt is now repaid. Goodbye.’

‘Crap,’ shouted Emily. ‘Great. Change. It’s like breathing. Asshats.’

She thrashed around for a while in an attempt to get rid of her frustration but eventually calmed down and sat still again. She concentrated.

‘Become a wolf,’ she said to herself. ‘Umm…woof? Growl? Bugger, how the hell do they do it?’

She heard footsteps coming down the corridor towards the room and she concentrated again, looking for her inner wolf. But it was no good.

She felt her anger rise, building as she cursed herself internally for being so pathetic. She wasn’t Pack. She wasn’t wolf. She was never into their whole, ‘*Life is suffering*,’ and ‘*To suffer is to live*.’ A part of her brain growled as she thought the wolves’ credo. Amazed she took a deep breath and said the next part of the credo aloud. ‘The strength of the Pack is the Wolf.’

She felt her hair rise on her head and a hind-part of her mind bared its teeth.

‘And the strength of the Wolf is the Pack,’ she shouted at the top of her voice.

Suddenly her sense of smell amped up to the point that she could smell the vamps walking down the corridor. She could smell the carpets outside the room, servants in a different part of the castle. And somewhere far away, the kitchens. Red meat. Her mouth filled with saliva at the thought.

And she changed. There was no pain. It was like being plunged into a bath of freezing cold water and then walking out into the sun. A feeling of relief. Of finally being free.

A feeling of rightness.

The rope slid from her changed body, slipping over her paws and falling to the floor alongside her ripped clothing. She scanned around for her necklace and pendant but couldn’t see them. She started to panic but then some part of her registered that the pendant was still with her. It had become part of her lupine body.

She had enough time to note that she was not as big a wolf as either William or Troy but she was still as large as a small pony. And her teeth were as long as a man’s hand.

The door opened and both Christopher and Tangerine walked in.

Without pause Emily launched herself at them. Her powerful jaws clamped down on Christopher's head and she bit down, crunching his cranium like a Christmas walnut. Then she shook him from side to side until his body flew off and his head stayed in her jaws. With a growl she spat him out and turned to face Tangerine.

The vampire squealed in shock and Emily tried to say something pithy. A comment worthy of the moment.

But all that came out of her wolfy mouth was a series of guttural, choking growls.

The sound terrified the female vampire even more than the sight of the wolf. And then Em was on her, ripping and tearing. She pulled her arms off, then clamped her jaws on Tangerine's throat and with slow and savage determination, bit her head off.

Em licked her lips. A part of her was grossed out but another part of her, the wolfy part, went – mmm, yum.

Then she ran down the corridor, all senses alert, looking for an exit.

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Chapter 36

The castle was huge and sprawling. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason as to where the corridors led, and some rooms simply opened out into other rooms. Many of them were empty, devoid of furniture and living beings.

Every now and then Em came across a vampire or a familiar and she showed no mercy, using her new-found jaws and teeth to great effect and dispatching all comers with supernatural speed. She made no attempt to hide the bodies figuring on using speed as opposed to stealth.

She smelled them before she heard them. Humans. At least twenty of them. A metallic smell. Cold sweat. Fear. Then she heard them. Whispered voices, urgent, stressed. She followed them. Down the corridor, left. A large wooden door. Two locks. Steel bars across it. Obviously a prison or holding area of some sort.

Food for the vampires.

Without a second thought Emily launched into a sprint and smashed through the massive oaken door, splintering it into pieces as she struck.

She found herself in a dark, windowless room. The only light came from a single flickering bulb in the ceiling. At least twenty people were huddled up against the far wall. Their clothes filthy, their faces set in various expressions of either terror or resignation. Acceptance of their inevitable fate.

Emily wasn't sure what to do next. It was quite obvious that her lupine form was scaring them but she didn't want to change back into her human form for a couple of reasons.

Firstly, she would be naked. Not that her modesty overrode her desire to help these people escape but simply because naked, blonde teenage girls didn't command much in the way of martial respect. It was difficult to take someone seriously when they were all exposed flesh and jiggling curves.

And, secondly, she wasn't sure if she could change back into a wolf if she did. Not that she wasn't totally capable of escaping in her human form but there was that whole naked thing again. Rather stay as she was and attempt to communicate.

Firstly she went down on her belly to show that she meant no harm. Then she wriggled forward until she was closer to them. Finally she

gestured towards the door with her head. Finally one of the prisoners, a young girl, probably around eleven years of age spoke.

'The big dog wants us to go with it,' she said.

Emily controlled the wolf in her that wanted to snap at the girl for calling her a dog and instead she nodded and then winked. The little girl smiled and took the hand of a woman next to her, presumably her mother. 'Come on,' she said as she pulled her towards the door.

Emily nodded again, stood up and padded out of the room, checking both ways for any *Nosferatu*.

The group followed their unlikely rescuer through the castle. Emily relied on her supersensitive olfactory and auditory senses to guide them, avoiding most of the *Nosferatu* as she did so.

The first one that she came across caused a ripple of alarm through the group as he stepped out of a door and into the corridor. But before he could react Emily had ripped his face off and torn his throat open, sending him to the true death.

Moments later Em was leading them out through a side door and into the grounds and the blessed sunlight. Once outside it was much easier. As Emily was the only Daywalker amongst vampires, she knew that any guards outside during the hours of sunup would be human and they were no match for a werewolf. Or even for a group of highly pissed off humans who had very recently almost become part of the *Nosferatu* menu.

In fact they only came across two familiars and the men in the group took care of them. Punching and kicking them into insensibility and relieving them of their weapons. In both cases, Remington pump-action shotguns.

Once they got out of the front gates Emily was lost so she simply sat down on her haunches and waited for someone else to take the lead.

A large boned man with long black hair. A thick beard and a spectacular Roman nose approached her.

He bowed deeply before he spoke. 'Greetings, *Mannaro*,' he said. 'My name is Antonio Moretti, I am from the village of Gandolfo. Please allow me to escort you to my house where we can provide shelter, food and clothing for you. We shall ensure that all of these good people get safely back to their own homes on the way.'

Emily nodded and followed Antonio as he beckoned to the group to get moving.

It took them a little over two hours to reach Antonio's dwelling and along the way they had made sure that everyone in the group had made it back to their homes. Some had been greeted by ecstatic family members, some had lived alone and some were greeted with suspicion and even fear. Fear of reprisals from the *Nosferatu* when they discovered that their food had had the temerity to escape.

In fact one man had flatly refused to take his wife and daughter back. The little girl who had called Em a dog, and her mother.

'No,' the man had shaken his head. 'If you stay here you will bring death to this house. I cannot take the risk.'

'Stop pretending that you are protecting anyone else but yourself,' argued the mother. 'There is no one here but you. But instead of taking a risk you would rather condemn your wife and your child to wander the streets, homeless?'

The man had turned his back on them.

Emily had felt the hackles on her back rise up and she had growled, low and deep. But Antonio had stepped forward and intervened. 'Do not bother disciplining him, *Mannaro*,' he had said to Em. 'This man is a coward. He is not deserving of such a beautiful wife and daughter. They will stay at my house as welcomed and honored guests until they decide what they would like to do next with their lives. As for him,' Antonio spat at the man's feet. 'His punishment will be to live a long life knowing that he is a gutless coward and a friendless weakling.'

Then they had left for Antonio's house. On the way there the Italian had whispered to Em, talking so softly that only she could hear him. 'Later,' he said. 'When this is all over, I have decided that his punishment shall be more immediate. Instead of living out a long life as a selfish man I have decided that he shall instead live out a very short one as a terrified man instead.'

Emily had grinned her wolfy grin and decided that she was beginning to like Antonio very much indeed.

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Emily followed Antonio, the little girl and her mother into his house. She had been surprised when they had walked through the gates and up the driveway. He was obviously a man of means. His house, although not that large, was exquisitely appointed. Gleaming white with full length picture windows that allowed access to a magnificent view of the valley below. The furnishings were subtle, yet of great quality and the works of art were all originals by excellent yet lesser known Italian artists.

Antonio led Em to a room and opened the door for her. 'Please, *Mannaro*,' he said. 'You can…err…change here in private. There are suitable clothes in the closet. I hope that they fit.'

Em waited for the door to close and then she concentrated on resuming her human form.

Nothing happened.

'Oh crap,' she said to herself. *'I don't think that I could stand spending the rest of my life on all fours.'* She sat down on her haunches and tried

to relax. Conjuring up human thoughts. Walking in a bipedal fashion. Putting on clothes. Makeup. Eating with a knife and fork.

Nothing.

She looked down at her chest and saw that there was a white lightning flash in her fur where her Japanese *Butsudan* medallion would have hung if she were in human form. *That must be where it is*, she thought, and she touched it with her paw.

Immediately her mind filled with human feelings and a wave of vertigo swept over her.

And she was standing upright and naked in the middle of the room.

'Whoa,' she said out loud. 'What a rush.'

Still feeling slightly unsteady, as if she needed a tail to help her balance, she walked over to the closet and opened it. It was full of clothes. All neatly pressed, of sober cut and color. All very close to her size.

And all decidedly male.

After a few seconds she chose a pair of black denim trousers, a black t-shirt, a leather jacket and a pair of Caterpillar work boots with steel tips. She had to put on two pairs of socks as the boots were a full size too large.

She jumped up and down a couple of times and stretched to check that the clothes fit well enough and then searched for a belt as the jeans were already starting to head south. Using her fangs she bit another couple of holes in the leather belt, cinched it around her waist, left the room and headed for the sounds of Antonio and his two guests.

They were in his kitchen, all three bolting down sandwiches, cold meats and cheese.

As she walked in, Antonio looked up at her, did a classic double take, dropped his sandwich on the table and then bowed deeply. '*Mannaro,*' he said. 'Or I should say, *Donna Mannaro*. I apologize, I had no idea that you were a female. And such a beautiful one at that.'

'Well, I am,' affirmed Emil. 'And a hungry one at that.' She walked over to the table and helped herself to a slice of bread and a hunk of cheese. The bread was a little stale, but the cheese was robust and flavorful.

'Where's the nice doggy gone?' Asked the little girl.

'Nice wolf, my darling,' corrected Emily. 'It's resting for now so don't disturb it, okay?'

The girl nodded.

'So how come you speak such good English?' Em asked the girl.

'We're not from here. My mommy and I are from London. We moved out here last year when my mommy married my new daddy.'

The mother stuck out her hand. 'Hi, sorry I didn't introduce myself

earlier but, you know.'

Em nodded, 'You weren't sure if I'd bite your hand off.'

'I suppose so, anyway, I'm Karen. This is my daughter, Imogen. And you already met my soon to be ex-husband.'

'Yeah,' affirmed Em. 'Captain courageous. Unfortunately he was correct in his assumption. They will come for you all tonight. As the sun goes down.'

Antonio nodded in agreement. 'I know. The night is their friend. We shall board up our houses, arm ourselves and prepare.'

'No,' disagreed Em. 'We shall do no such thing.' She glanced at the small carriage clock on Antonio's mantelpiece. 'It's summer, so we have at least seven hours of daylight left. We need to go to the village and round up a good old fashioned angry mob. But instead of torches and pitchforks we take shotguns, rifles, pistols and a few gallons of gasoline. Then we wipe out this nest of evil once and forever.'

Antonio grimaced. 'We can try,' he said. 'But this village has been under the yoke of the *Nosferatu* for so long that it has become an accepted way of life. And until recently, it was a two way trade, in a manner of speaking. They provided a measure of wealth for all via solid employment. They helped financially, providing funds for new roads, the village hall, facilities. In return we gave them service.'

'And the odd person to feed on,' added Emily.

'Yes,' admitted Antonio. 'But that was a rare occurrence. They usually fed on outsiders. They had them brought in from other parts of Italy. Even from other parts of Europe. But lately things have changed. They no longer treat us with any respect. They take what they want when they want. And any who have tried to leave have not made it out of the local area. We are trapped.'

'Well, you dance with the Devil then you move to his music. You see, there's a new *Capo*, and he thinks of humans as food. Less than cattle. So you fight back now or you wait for death. It's that simple.'

'I will fight, *Donna Mannaro,*' affirmed Antonio.

'Cool. By the way, what's with this *Mannaro*?' Asked Em.

'It is Italian for what you are. I think the English word is werewolf. *Donna Mannaro* is female werewolf.'

Em smiled. 'Oh I am much more than just a werewolf.'

The Italian raised an eyebrow. 'In what way?'

'Never mind. Time is wasting. How do we go about scaring up a mob?'

'We go to the village. I am well known. First, we start with Mayor Bertolini. Once we have convinced him, then I will approach the priest, Father Grimaldi. After that we shall split up and get as many people into the village square as we can. One big speech and we take it from there. But let me warn you, Donna Mannaro, these people have

become used to hiding behind closed doors. Using their fear as a reason to do nothing. It will be more than difficult to convince them to take a stand.'

'You just get them there, Antonio,' said Em. 'I'll have a talk and then we'll march on the castle.'

'That simple?' Asked Antonio skeptically.

'Yes,' affirmed Emily. 'That simple. Trust me.'

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Chapter 37

Mayor Bertolini was one of the oldest men that Em had ever seen. Well, one of the oldest human men. She put him at about one hundred and two years old in the shade. But although his skin was as lined as a dried up riverbed and his hair consisted of three wispy strands of gray fluff, his eyes were still youthful and his step was spry.

And he had the voice of an archangel, deep and resonant and commanding.

The priest was a short, round, Friar Tuck look-alike; he wore a simple black, ankle length cassock and carried a bible. The cassock had been worn thin, and the black was actually closer to dark green, so old it was.

Antonio had spoken to them both about taking on the *Nosferatu* and, to his surprise, they had both agreed with alacrity and had immediately gone about the town, rousting out all to attend a meeting in the square.

And now the three town notables and Emily stood before a crowd of perhaps eight hundred people.

'I am amazed,' whispered Antonio to Emily. 'I mean, these are good men, both the mayor and the Father, but they have never before been so keen to take action. So ready for a fight.'

Em just smiled. She hadn't been surprised in the slightest. After all, she had hammered both of them with enough coercion to convince a corpse, let alone a living human being. So when they reacted with such fervor it was the very least that she expected.

Normally she would not have resorted to screwing with someone's mind like that, but she knew the enemy that they were facing and she could leave nothing to chance. This was an all-or-nothing situation and she had chosen - all.

'Now for the difficult part,' added Antonio. 'Turning this crowd of sheep into a pack of wolves.'

'Not a problem,' said Em. 'If you will allow me to give a short speech.'

'Do you speak Italian,' asked the mayor.

Em shook her head. 'No need. You can translate.'

Bertolini shrugged. Whatever this woman wanted was fine by him. Never before had he felt such a bond in such a short time. He felt like he would literally do anything for her.

Emily stood up on a chair and held her hands above her head to attract attention. The crowd stilled and stared.

'People,' she said. 'We face a great evil. Tonight, the *Nosferatu* are going to come down from the castle and wreak havoc on this good village. However, I will not allow that to happen. So, instead, we shall band together and, before the night falls, we will attack them.'

Bertolini translated and there was an immediate negative response from the crowd. People shaking their heads, shouting questions. Some already walking away.

And Emily unleashed the full force of her coercion.

The crowd fell silent. The leavers turned and came back. Then she spoke again.

'You will follow me.'

The mayor repeated her words in Italian.

'What will you do?' Questioned Emily.

'*Vi seguiremo*,' they shouted. 'We will follow you.'

'Good. Now, go to your houses and collect whatever weapons that you have. Be quick and meet me back here. Go, now.'

The crowd dissipated as they ran to arm themselves.

'Antonio,' said Emily. 'Can you get some sort of hand cart and fill it with drums of gasoline. We're gonna have ourselves an old fashioned burning tonight. From this day on I aim to make the castle of Gandolfino into a quaint, burned out ruin.'

Antonio left at a run to do Emily's bidding.

Less than an hour later the crowd had reassembled. Emily walked amongst them and split them into two groups. The women, children and elderly she told to stay and guard the village. The rest, all men between sixteen and sixty, she took to one side. There were exactly ninety of them. Then she asked Antonio and the mayor to get all the best weapons and as much ammunition that they could find and ensure that the group assailing the castle had them.

Another half an hour ticked by and her troops were as kitted out as they could ever hope to be. Being a rural village most of the residents had some form of hunting firearm. Mainly shotguns but also many rifles in various calibers. As well as that there was a smattering of handguns ranging from modern semi-auto pistols to old WW1 Webley revolvers.

So ever man had at least one weapon and a handful of ammunition. Emily had taken a Browning hi-power 9mm and two magazines of ammo to supplement her weapon of choice, the axe, Deathwalker.

She gave them all a last check and then led the way, marching towards the castle. As they walked, she clamped down on the thoughts of guilt that were assailing her. She had coerced these people into doing this. She had stripped their power of choice from them, torn

their free will away and replaced it with her own agenda. She had done it even though she knew that many of these fine, innocent people would die as a result. They would die and it would be her fault.

But she also knew that this was a battle that needed to be fought. A battle that needed to be won. And if that meant that she had to lose a little of her own humanity to do so, then so be it.

'So, *Donna Mannaro*,' asked Antonio. 'What is the plan?'

'There is no plan,' she answered. 'We storm the building, go in through the front door and kill everyone and everything inside. Then we pour gasoline all over the place, flick a Zippo and go home to celebrate.'

'You make it sound so simple.'

'It is,' admitted Em. 'War is uncomplicated. Fighting, destroying, killing. It's straightforward. It's easy. The difficult part is learning to live with yourself afterwards.'

The horde arrived at the front doors and Emily mounted the stairs and stood in front of them. She concentrated and Deathwalker appeared in her right hand. Then she drew her pistol in her left, rolled her head on her neck to loosen the muscles. And smashed the door down.

'Right,' she shouted. 'Let's kick ass.'

They streamed into the building, buoyed up by years of oppression and generations of being forced to kowtow to the creatures of darkness that had controlled their very lives.

This was revenge on an industrial scale.

Around thirty men spread out on the ground floor and the rest went up the stairs, looking for someone to kill. Almost straight away the booming reports of the shotguns filled the air, followed by the sharp crack of rifles and handguns.

Emily stood still at the foot of the stairs and let her mind flow, seeking out the *Nosferatu*. She could feel them all about her. Some on the ground floor. Some above her.

Then she found a crowd of them. Below. The basement.

'Antonio,' she called. 'Get the gasoline. Quickly.'

The Italian rushed outside and grabbed the handcart. Loaded onto it were four forty-five gallon drums of gas. It had taken four men to drag it to the castle and, try as he might, Antonio could get it to the foot of the stairs but no further.

Emily sprinted to help, moving at vampire speed she grabbed the handle of the cart and bounced it up the stairs and through the shattered front door.

'Follow me,' she commanded as she ran down the corridor. At the end there was a large set of double doors that led to the kitchen. And

on the right of them another smaller set. These were less ornate, and they had no lock. She kicked them open. A flight of steps led down into the darkness.

Using her enhanced strength, Em grabbed the drums of fuel, ripped the tops off and threw them down into the basement. The fourth and final drum she rolled down the stairs, leaving a river of gasoline in its wake.

Then she turned to Antonio and held out her hand. 'Zippo.'

The Italian man smiled and slapped a chrome lighter in her palm like a theater nurse handing a surgeon a scalpel.

Em flicked the wheel, stood back and cast the flickering flame down the stairs.

There was a solid thump as the gas took flame and then a fireball billowed out of the doorway.

'Get back,' she shouted at Antonio as she readied her axe in her right hand and pointed her pistol at the open doorway. 'Here they come.'

A score of burning vampires came screeching up the stairs, and they launched themselves at Emily. She pulled the trigger and the Browning High Power sounded like a submachine gun on full auto. The first three bloodsuckers went down, their heads riddled with bullets.

Then she dropped the empty magazine and slapped in a fresh one, all was done at a speed that defied the human eye. To Antonio everything was simply a blur of movement. Flashes of color and then dead vampires dropping to the floor at Emily's feet, their heads almost non-existent due to the fact that she had blown them away.

The pistol ran dry and Deathwalker took over. Emily swung the butterfly shaped blades like she was dancing. And the flames reflected off the polished steel, creating a circle of fire in front of her. The six headless bodies became ten, then fifteen and finally the last one fell twitching at her feet. A pile of dead bloodsuckers that would trouble the village no more.

Without pause, Em ran back to the entrance and checked on her troops. The ground floor seemed under control so she sprinted up to the next floor.

Two vamps on her right at the top of the stairs. On the floor, six dead villagers. Deathwalker sang, and the vamps went to their true death.

Three more at the end of the corridor. Men shooting at them. Puffs of blood spraying from the vamps as the shotgun pellets struck. But still the bloodsuckers moved forward, slashing, maiming and killing as they did so. Emily engaged them. They died.

The next floor. More bodies. More innocent villagers lying in

twisted agony. More blood. More death.

Emily killed again. And again.

And then Antonio was grabbing her shoulder and she could feel the heat from the flames as they crackled around her.

'It's over,' he shouted in her ear. 'Everyone else is out. We must go now before it's too late.'

But it already was too late. The flames billowed up the stairs and beat at their faces like a living creature. They ran, back down the corridor but it followed them, hissing and roaring.

Emily vanished Deathwalker, picked Antonio up in her arms and jumped out of the window, landing safely in the garden three floors below.

She put the Italian man down and looked about her. The men that she thought of as her troops were standing in a group in the front garden. Far enough away from the flames to avoid getting scorched but close enough to dispatch anything that might make it out of the inferno, however unlikely that may be.

Em did a quick head count. There were forty three men left standing.

She was responsible for the death of forty seven men.

She shook off the massive blanket of guilt that threatened to suffocate her. She was at war and needs must. She would not allow herself the comfort of caring. Of allowing her feelings to matter. The *Nosferatu* were evil. They had to be exterminated. That was the be all and end all of the matter.

Father Grimaldi walked up to Em, took her right hand and kissed it. 'Thank you,' he said. 'We are free.'

Em tried to smile, but it came out as more of a grimace. 'Yes,' she agreed. 'You are. Where is mayor Bertolini?'

The priest frowned. 'Unfortunately he did not make it. But he died well, taking out at least one of the forsaken by himself.'

Em struggled to hide her emotions. To keep back the tears. *He had died well*, she thought to herself. *And I suppose that is all that we can hope for in this life. To die well.*

'What now, *Donna Mannaro*?' Asked Antonio.

Emily shrugged. 'Now…you live. Your final battle is over and you have won. But for me, my war continues and I have many battles still to wage. I need to make a phone call. Does anyone have a cell phone that I can use?'

Antonio handed her an iPhone, and she dialed a number from memory.

'William?' She said. 'Yes, I'm alive. Obviously. I'm in Italy. It's a long story. I wonder if you could send Latobias to pick me up?' She gave the Omega her location. 'Thank you,' she continued. 'Yes, I

know. He'll be here in ten minutes.'

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Chapter 38

It had been five days since Nathan had gotten news that his castle had been destroyed and all of the brethren there had been murdered. Once again he had underestimated that bitch. But never again.

He had put a plan in motion that would finally defeat her and her animal minions. And then he would go back to his castle and visit pain and suffering on those villagers the likes of which they had never even dreamed of in their worst nightmares.

His Nightwalkers had spent the last few days gathering every one of his brethren from the United Kingdom and bringing them to his dockland fortress.

Nathan walked swiftly down one of the long, seemingly endless corridors that made up the interior of his new abode, seeing perfectly despite the almost complete lack of lighting.

At the end of the corridor, a steel door. He spun the locking handle and pulled the door open. Two inches thick, over a ton of hardened steel that swiveled open on silent, oiled hinges to reveal a massive room.

A room with three flickering naked bulbs swinging from the high ceiling. A room with a bare concrete floor. A room with no windows and extra-thick, reinforced walls.

A room that was full of Grinders. The brain damaged offspring of the true *Nosferatu*. With all the strength and speed and healing powers but no thought or emotion save that of which to feed and kill any human being that they came across.

And Nathan's Nightwalkers had collected over two hundred of them.

The *Capo* walked amongst them, stroking their heads as they knelt before him. Scratching the odd one under the chin or patting their shoulders as the gibbered and slobbered and giggled insanely.

Any other *Nosferatu* would never have chanced walking amongst so many Grinders but Nathan knew that, above everything, the Grinder respected strength. And at this moment, every one of their burned-out brains registered one hard cold fact. The entity walking amongst them was probably the most dangerous living thing on the planet.

So instead of swarming him and ripping him into bite sized chunks they smarmed and simpered and worshipped.

They waited to do his bidding. To rend and tear at his command.

To kill the *Capo's* enemies.

Nathan smiled. ‘Soon, my children,’ he said. ‘Very soon.’

He locked the door behind him and headed back to his main suite of rooms, calling out for the Nightwalker, Bartholomew as he walked.

In a blur of motion, the Nightwalker appeared at his side like magic.

‘How many of the brethren do we have here?’ Asked Nathan.

‘Seventy six, *Capo*,’ answered Bartholomew. ‘Twenty four Bloodwraiths, seven Elders and the rest are level one Youngsters but all of good quality.’

‘It is time,’ stated Nathan. ‘Do it.’

Bartholomew bowed deeply and left at the same speed that he had arrived. Off to do his masters bidding.

***

He was known as Slateshard Robert Essex Metamorphic, Guardian ninety four thousand seven hundred and twelve. And he was one of the few guardian gargoyles that had company. For over five hundred years he had shared the roof of the church of All-Hallows-By-The-Tower in London.

His two companions were Limestone Trevor Kent Sedimentary and Basalt Rupert Cornwall Igneous. Together they had survived the Great Fire of London back in 1666 and he still remembered the famed diarist, Samuel Pepys, climbing onto the rooftop to watch the progress of the fire as it swept across the capital city. He recalled the blitz during the Second World War, the sounds of the bombs as they exploded, knocking down a sizable part of the church. They had survived the snow and the hail and the sun.

But he knew that their time was finally up. Because, although Gargoyles are patient and dedicated and as strong as…well…as strong as a rock. They cannot move very quickly. In fact, to get from one side of the roof to the other took any of them the better part for a day and a night.

So, when it came to self defense, they simply didn’t have any.

Standing opposite him, backlit by the full moon, stood three vampires. All of them were carrying twenty pound sledgehammers with three foot Hickory shafts. And it was obvious that they had not come for any social reasons.

The group of vamps split up, one heading for each guardian.

Before they started swinging Slateshard asked a question.

‘Why?’

The bloodsucker shrugged. ‘Because you chose the wrong side.’

And the guardian smiled. Because he knew that he had not.

The hammer came down hard.

Within minutes there was nothing left but three piles of rubble.

‘Weird,’ said the vamp that Slateshard had spoken to. ‘They don’t bleed or nothing.’ He picked up a chunk of rock and rolled it around in his hand. ‘It’s just stone. Like they never were alive.’

‘Yeah,’ laughed one of the others. ‘Well then don’t try to feed off him.’

There was a general chuckle and the lead vamp took a note out of his pocket and laid it under one of the pieces of the broken guardian.

It was simple, short and to the point.

“Emily. This has to end. Preston Industrial Estate. Isle of Dogs. London Docklands. Bring your friends. Yours in Death – The *Capo di tutti capi*, Nathan Tremblay.”

Nathan had thrown down the gauntlet and it was up to Emily to accept the challenge.

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Chapter 39

Latobias brought the helicopter in low and fast, approaching from over the Thames River, the rising sun behind it. As he passed over the first guard tower, Tag leaned out the side door and opened up with Missus Jones. 7.62 cartridges poured out of the breech and fell from the aircraft like golden hail. The guard tower disappeared in a flash of fire and lead.

Then Latobias swiveled the helicopter and brought it in to a broadside position on the next tower. The sniper in the guardhouse managed to get off a single shot that ricocheted off the fuselage and then Missus Jones shredded him.

Within thirty seconds the other guard towers were reduced to kindling and the helicopter was hovering in front of the main gate. Twelve foot high, inch thick, solid steel.

Missus Jones tore it to shreds like it was tinfoil.

And the werewolves streamed through changing as they did.

The battle had begun.

Latobias landed the helicopter in the open area in front of the main warehouse and William, Troy, Tag, Dietz and Emily jumped out before he rose back into the sky.

William led the way, flanked by Troy and Emily.

Tag and Dietz took up the rear, moving at a much slower human pace. Dietz was laden down with two extra crates of ammo for Missus Jones as well as his MP5 submachine gun. He was also carrying two flasks of Holy Water. And this time it wasn't his usual tricksy acid-based concoction but rather, they were actual bottles blessed by the Holy Father himself. Because this time he felt that, instead of a bottle of acid, he genuinely needed a little help from the Lord. He took the bottles out and gave them each a quick kiss before he pocketed them again.

Tag and Dietz were left behind as they ran at normal human speed but William wasn't worried about them. With Tag's superhuman strength and Dietz's guile and battle experience, they were a two man wrecking crew and woe betide any bloodsuckers that thought that those two humans would be easy pickings.

The Pack had already smashed open the front entrance to the warehouse complex and had streamed inside, barking and howling.

Twenty seven wolves, all seeking to avenge Bastian and Sylvian.

Behind them came the Omega, the Alpha and the Daywalker. A trio of power the likes of which had never before been assembled.

The Pack spread out, breaking into smaller groups of five or six as they entered the building, running down the myriads of corridors, smashing open doorways and seeking the *Nosferatu*.

The first group of five wolves came into contact with a gaggle of vamps in a room to the right of the main corridor. Five Bloodwraiths. There was no pattern to their attack, it was simply bite and rend with jaws snapping and teeth grinding.

The vamps fought back with their superior speed and long razor sharp talons and the battles were short and extremely bloody. But unfortunately five wolves were not quite a match for an equal amount of Bloodwraiths and at the end of the first skirmish, five wolves and three vamps lay dead. Their mutilated bodies torn to shreds, wolf and vamp mixed together in a final bloody orgy.

Another group of wolves ran down an ancillary corridor, chasing the scent of a gaggle of vamps only to run straight into a trap. Three claymore mines, all recharged with silver ball bearings instead of steel, exploded and scythed through the group, blasting legs off and tearing deep into their flesh. All four went down in a welter of blood and agony as the silver prevented them healing.

But any group of vampires that ran into the team of Em, Troy and William lasted mere seconds until they met their true death. The three destroyers didn't even have to slow their forward momentum when they fought. Deathwalker sang its song of retribution while the Alpha and Omega, both in Wolfman form, simply tore any opposition to shreds in mere seconds.

And then there were the unfortunates who came across Missus Jones. The minigun spewed hot lead out at a rate of six thousand rounds per minute. But Tag had to be careful. 7.62mm ammunition clocks in at about five pounds of weight per every one hundred rounds. This meant that the four thousand rounds of ammo that he was carrying weighed in at over two hundred pounds. This plus the ordnance meant that Tag was running around with over four hundred pounds on his back. An impossible feat for anyone not gifted with superhuman strength.

Dietz was humping another one thousand rounds in two cases. This weighed in at one hundred pounds weight and, although he was a bull of a man, it was seriously impeding his maneuverability.

So all told, at the rate of fire produced by the minigun, Tag had approximately one full minute of fire. And when you are in the heat of battle, fighting a bunch of scary bloodsucking monsters, that is not as much ammo as one would initially think.

In fact, Tag had already burned off over two thousand rounds. But on the plus side he had destroyed over seven bloodsuckers.

The Pack continued to advance deep into the complex, killing and being killed as they did so. The battle swung back and forth for a while but, slowly; it seemed as though team Emily was gaining the upper hand. The Pack alone would not have been able to do it but with the addition of the trio of Em, Troy and William and the destructive capabilities of Tag and Dietz, the *Nosferatu* were being hunted down and destroyed at a much faster rate than they were killing in return.

'Where is Nathan?' Shouted Em. 'Come on out, you asshat. Come and get some. Coward.'

The trio broke through another set of double doors and into a huge internal warehouse. Like most of the other rooms, there was a concrete floor, high iron ceilings and dim lighting. There were no exterior windows but another three double doors were situated along the far wall of the room. They were all closed. The room was completely empty.

Tag and Dietz ran in behind the trio and stopped to catch their breath. Tag took the opportunity to drop his empty ammo boxes and switch out with Dietz, strapping the two, five hundred round cases to his webbing and relieving the Knight of the weight.

Dietz let out a sigh of relief. 'Thank the lord,' he gasped. 'That stuff is heavy.'

'So I got two thousand rounds left,' noted Tag. 'How long will that last?' He asked Dietz.

'Twenty seconds.'

Tag nodded. 'Cool. That should be enough.'

A few wolves ran into the room, sniffed the air and then sat.

'Where are the others?' Asked William.

The lead wolf shook his head. The surviving wolves were so split up that, although the Pack could sense their general direction, they weren't sure how many were alive and exactly where they were. Although it was obvious to William that many of his Pack were already dead.

'Nathan,' shouted Emily. 'Craven dick head. Where are you? Come out, come out wherever you are. Emily wants to play.'

The center door at the end of the cavernous room opened, silently on oiled hinges.

And Nathan walked out. He was wearing soft, mid-calf, black leather boots, black leather trousers and no shirt. His long hair was tied back in a ponytail and he was clean shaven.

Even from over one hundred feet away his malevolence was a palpable thing. An aura of evil and ambition that pushed out ahead of

him like a black and midnight cloud.

He smiled and his fangs glistened in the low light, three inches long and needle pointed. Then he raised his right hand end extended his talons. Blood red and as long as a man's forearm. As sharp as a surgeon's scalpel and harder than tungsten.

'Man,' said Tag. 'Look, it's Wolverine.'

Em sniggered. 'Stop it; he thinks that he looks cool. Don't be so mean.'

Tag cocked Missus Jones. 'Don't care. Anyway, let's see how he takes to my girlfriend.' And he pulled the trigger in a quick three second burst.

A stream of superheated lead erupted from the barrel as three hundred rounds tore through the air towards the *Capo* of the *Nosferatu*.

But Nathan moved so fast it looked as though he had teleported himself across the room and the slugs merely tore a hole in the wall where he had been mere microseconds before.

And then the other doors opened and a wave of gibbering, slobbering, keening monsters came pouring out.

'Grinders,' shouted William.

Tag depressed the trigger again and swept the minigun from side to side; mowing down the twisted versions of the *Nosferatu* he did so. But twenty seconds goes by real quick and although he destroyed over thirty of them before he ran out of ammo there were still almost two hundred left. He dropped Missus Jones and pulled out his two Desert Eagle pistols. Dietz cocked his MP5 and Em called Deathwalker back into her hand.

The wave of Grinders struck them like an avalanche.

While Em, Troy, Dietz, Tag and the wolves fought for their lives, William leapt over the mass of heaving, battling beings and headed for Nathan, growling his challenge as he did so.

The two of them met on the periphery of the battle, crashing together like a train wreck. There was no finesse involved, no back and forth, parry and thrust. It was elemental. Two unbelievable powerful beings tearing at each other with tooth and claw and fangs.

Nathan feinted left and then swung a powerful right into William's face. But at the last microsecond, William opened his jaws and clamped them down on Nathan's forearm. The *Capo* countered by slashing his talons across William neck. But William hunched up and the instead of his neck, Nathan cut deep into his shoulder.

The wound went to the bone and the pain was enough to force William to let go of the *Capo's* arm to regroup his senses.

Then he counterattacked.

But try as he might he could not break through the uber-vampires

defense and even his mighty strength was beginning to wane.

Nathan, however, wasn't even breathing hard and his blows were just as powerful as they had been at the beginning of the brawl.

William rolled and bit into Nathan's calf but Nathan bent down and hammered his talons into the back of William's head, clawing and ripping away chunks of flesh as he did so.

The Omega scrambled back but Nathan followed him, slashing and rending. William snapped and rolled in an attempt to escape the punishment that the *Capo* was dealing out but he was nearing the end of his tether. His movements were slow, his blows lackluster and his reaction times microseconds behind the vampire's.

And in superhuman combat, microseconds are the difference between life and death.

William grabbed Nathan's right arm and threw him against the wall. But as he did so, Nathan twisted in the air, and struck the wall feet first. He propelled himself back at the Wolfman and crashed into him, both arms outstretched, talons to the fore. And because William was still off balance from throwing the *Capo,* he couldn't get his paws up fast enough to fend off the blow.

Nathan's talons struck William in the neck with the force of a steam locomotive. The razor sharp, foot long claws tore open his jugular veins and severed his spinal cord in one fell swoop.

The Omega sank to the floor, his life's blood gushing from the irreparable wound in his neck.

As his life-energy drained from him, his body reverted to human form.

Valiantly he struggled to stand but his severed spine had paralyzed him and he couldn't move.

Nathan stood above him, his breath wasn't even elevated. He was the supreme killing machine and none could stand against him. Not even the Omega Wolf.

William struggled to see Emily. But he could not turn his head so even that last request was denied him.

Nathan Tremblay knelt down beside the Omega, grabbed his hair and yanked his face towards him. 'So,' he said. 'How about them apples?'

But William didn't answer. He would never answer anyone ever again.

Emily screamed out in anguish as she sensed the passing of the Omega. The remaining wolves howled their despair and Troy fell to one knee like he had been gut shot, such was the pain of bereavement that threatened to engulf him.

Nathan stood tall, held out his arms and shouted a command. 'Step back,' he told the Grinders.

As one they all ceased fighting and scuttled back a few feet. The word of their master was law and they would die before disobeying.

'Who is the coward now?' he shouted at Emily. 'You are pathetic. I have killed your master. I have destroyed your Pack. I have bettered you in every way possible. I am superior to you all. I am the *Capo*.'

'Bullshit,' denied Tag. 'You just a weird looking dude in leather pants. And it's time that we took you out. So bring it on, pretty-boy and let Tag whip your ass for you.'

Dietz turned to Tag and grimaced. 'Really? You going to whip his ass?'

Tag laughed. 'No way, the dude is just too quick. But I'll have a go at it.'

'No,' said Emily. 'You won't. He's mine.'

Tag nodded. 'Okay, no worries. Dietz, Troy and I will just take on the hundred or so monsters instead. Suits me.'

Dietz took out one of his flasks of Holy Water and flung it at the nearest group of Grinders. The bottle smashed against ones head and sprinkled the water over the whole group. All of them immediately started smoking and fell to the floor, screaming and howling in agony as their flesh fell from them in chunks.

'More acid?' Asked Tag.

Dietz shook his head. 'Real Holy Water.'

'Well I'll be dammed,' commented Tag. 'It works.'

'I suppose that you just have to have faith,' said Dietz.

'Oh well,' said Troy. 'Let's do this.'

The four of them plus the remaining wolves threw themselves at the Grinders, shooting and cutting and biting with abandon, knowing that it was their last charge. Knowing that it was hopeless but driven by the fact that someone had to do it. And to die fighting was better than to die running.

Then there was a massive crash and half of the roof fell in. Sunlight poured down on them and the Grinders scuttled away from it, shrieking and mewling as it scorched their exposed skin.

A shadow blotted out the sun.

Troy looked up. 'Holy crap,' he cussed. 'A dragon.'

It was like a lion attacking a herd of sheep. Wherever the Grinders ran the dragon cut them down with jets of burning plasma. White hot streams of fire sizzled and crackled and the monsters screamed and died in their scores.

Within minutes the only vampire left was Nathan. Standing in the corner of the warehouse, keeping in the shadow. Avoiding the sun.

Emily walked over to him, swinging Deathwalker in a lazy figure eight in front of her as she did so.

'Ready to die?' She asked.

'Are you?' Counted Nathan.

'In your dreams, laddie,' said Emily.

The fight lasted less than two seconds. Two seconds of preternaturally swift combat. Nathan attacked and Emily counted. Deathwalker sang its song of horror and bereavement and Nathan fell to the floor.

Emily had cut off his arms and legs and the vampire lay there screaming in mortal agony. But even in the throes of utter torment, Nathan's powerful *Nosferatu* body was starting to heal. His wounds had closed up and his limbs were starting to regenerate.

'Dietz,' called Em.

The Knight of the Church stepped forward.

'Do you have any more of that Holy Water?'

Dietz nodded.

Em stood up and pointed at the evil thing writhing on the floor in front of her. 'Finish it.'

Dietz knelt beside Nathan and closed his eyes for a moment while he prayed. Then he took the bottle out, unscrewed the lid and poured the contents onto Nathan's face.

Nothing happened.

'What, no fancy words or nothing?' Asked Tag. 'What about the whole, power of Christ compels me stuff?'

Dietz smiled. 'We are not play-acting, my friend. We are simply delivering the Lord's justice. And it appears that I truly do have the faith. Which is nice to know.'

And Nathan's face started to bubble and burn.

He screamed for the entire ten minutes that it took him to die. And when it was over there was no body left, only a small pile of greasy ash.

Emily looked for the Dragon but it had gone and in its place stood an old Chinese lady in a blue silk kimono.

Emily bowed before her. 'Thank you, great Dragon,' she said.

'It is of no moment,' answered the old lady. 'In fact, you should thank your friend, Merlin. He can be most persuasive. We Dragons have not left our communities for many thousands of years now and he convinced me to break with tradition.' She shook her head. 'That is a very naughty man.'

'Whatever,' added Tag. 'Thanks to you Dragon Lady. We owe you one.'

She nodded. 'Yes you do.'

Then she started to shimmer and change as an aura of green light coruscated around her. Just before she reverted to her dragon form she turned to Emily and spoke one word.

'Persevere.'

And then the great beast took flight and left.

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Chapter 40

Three weeks had passed since the great battle.

Tag had left for Italy with Dietz. They had decided to take a well-deserved holiday and Dietz was going to show the big man the sights.

Nine wolves remained, and they had decided to stay at the forest dwelling while they waited for Troy to tell them what to do next.

Emily and Troy were in the London penthouse at St. Pancras.

Em woke up as the sun streamed into the room. She rolled over and felt for Troy but although the bed was still warm from his body heat he wasn't there. So she got out of bed, threw on a robe and went through to the kitchen.

He was standing next to the kitchen table; in front of him were two empty mugs and a kettle. He was staring at a packet of tea leaves, a concerned look on his face.

Em walked over and gave him a kiss. 'Wassup?'

He held the packet out to her. 'It's Tag's stash of tea leaves. He normally takes it with him but he must have forgotten.'

So?' asked Em.

'Well, we always wondered how he made his tea. Now we know.'

Emily took the packet from Troy, opened it and took a sniff. 'What is that?'

Troy started to laugh. 'It's cut with marijuana,' he said. 'No wonder we all liked it so much. It's the ultimate de-stresser. You want some?'

Em shook her head. 'You know what; I think I'll go for coffee.'

'Me too,' agreed Troy.

He brewed a couple of mugs and the two of them sat down.

'So,' said Troy. 'What next?'

Emily thought for a while before she answered. 'Next…we carry on. The fight against evil never ends.' She leaned over and kissed him again. 'We persevere,' she said. 'Together.'

He toasted her with his mug. 'Together.'

And far away the Pack threw their heads back and howled as they sensed their new Omega's happiness.

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Book 5

PROPHECY

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CHAPTER 1

Father Dubois knelt down next to the body, crossing himself as he did.

'Did anyone call the *Gendarmes*?' he asked.

'Yes, Father,' answered *monsieur* Petit. 'I called the police. He is on his way. He had to finish lunch first.'

The priest nodded. Lunch was important. After all, the body was going nowhere and there was little the *Gendarme* could do about it. But to spoil a good meal was a crime in itself.

The girl lying on the ground was pale. As pale as a shroud. Unnaturally so, even for a corpse.

And this was the second one in as many weeks.

The priest mumbled a prayer under his breath as he inspected the girl's wounds. The cause of death was obvious.

Her throat had been viciously torn open as if by a wild animal.

Father Dubois knew exactly what had killed the young woman.

This wanton destruction was the mark of the true feeder. Because, contrary to popular belief, they did not leave neat twin punctures as so often portrayed in the movies.

No, they ravened on their victims, ripping into them with an insatiable blood lust.

Worse than the most vicious of animals.

Evil personified.

Vampire.

The priest took out his cell phone and dialled a number. A number he had hoped to never use, even though it had been in his possession for over ten years.

It was answered on the second ring.

'Muller.'

'Most Holy Knight,' greeted the father. 'My name is father Dubois of the Voire parish. We have a problem.'

And he told the Knight of the Holy See about the two attacks.

'The Voire parish, you say?' enquired Muller.

'Yes, most Holy.'

'I know the area. In the Dordogne?'

'That is correct, most Holy.'

'I have some loose ends to tie up, but I will be there in two or three days. However, father Dubois, you are in luck. There is someone I know who lives in the Voire region. I will text you their details. Go

straight to them. Tell them, Dietz Muller, Knight of the Holy See sent you. Tell them of the attacks.'

'I will be done, most Holy.'

'Oh, and father.'

'Yes.'

'When you meet them, be strong, do not let your fear overcome you. And above all, show respect, these are beyond doubt the most lethal beings you will ever meet. And they may not be that happy to see you.'

The knight rang off.

And it was with great trepidation that father Dubois noted that Muller had referred to them as *Beings* … not *Humans*.

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CHAPTER 2

Emily leaned the push bike up against the barn, picked up her basket of goods and walked to the house, entering through the back door, straight into the large farmhouse kitchen.

Troy stood up from the table to greet her.

'Steak?' he asked.

Emily opened the straw bag and took out a massive cut of beef. Enough to make a meal for a family of eight. Or a dinner for a werewolf and his mate.

There were no vegetables.

The two had been living in the Dordogne for just over a year. The farmhouse was large but basic. Running hot and cold water, fireplaces for warmth, old but solid furniture. A radio, but no television.

Nestled in amongst rows of grape vines, it had once been a winery, but now the vats lay idle.

After their last great battle against the vampires, resulting in the loss of Bastian, William, Sylvian and most of the pack, Emily and Troy had left the United Kingdom and headed for the rural environs of the French Dordogne.

It was with surprise that Emily had discovered that both William and Sylvian had left all they owned to her in their wills. Countless millions in cash, gold, jewels and antiques. As well as numerous properties dotted around the United Kingdom and Europe.

If you added this largess to the Institute's funds that she controlled, it made Emily one of the wealthiest people in Europe.

But the money meant little to either her or Troy.

The simple farmhouse was all they needed.

They knew they were hiding from responsibility. Their planned period of R & R had stretched out to become a way of life, and now they lived day to day. Revelling in their wolfen forms by night, running free through the surrounding oak and chestnut forests. Remaining human by day.

Eating. Sleeping. Making love.

And not thinking about vampires.

Troy used a kitchen knife to slice the haunch of beef into huge steaks while Emily heated a cast iron grill on the stove. But before Troy could begin his cook up, both Emily and he stopped what they were doing and cocked their heads to one side.

'Bicycle,' said Emily.

Troy sniffed the air. ‘Male. Stranger.’

Emily turned the stove off and the two of them walked to the front door, about them a definite air of readiness. Coiled springs.

Tension.

They listened and waited as the bicycle came to a halt. They heard the stand being kicked down followed by footsteps.

As the visitor approached the front door, Troy whipped it open.

Father Dubois flinched back. In front of him stood a young male. Well over six foot tall, perhaps two hundred and thirty pounds of ripped muscle. Long dark hair, short beard and moustache.

And eyes of golden yellow.

Behind him, one of the most beguiling looking females he had ever seen. Tall, slender, long blonde hair and flawless, pale skin. Unlike the male, her eyes were an impossible green.

As green as an Irish lover’s grave.

And the raw power that radiated off the two of them made him feel as if he was being scorched with fire. It was a physical, palpable thing. An aura of supreme authority.

Such was their obvious superiority, he had to force himself not to kneel in their presence. Instead, he mumbled a quick Hail Mary to give himself the strength to face them.

‘Father,’ greeted the female, her voice low, husky yet musical. ‘Please, come in.’

The powerful young man raised an eyebrow as if surprised at the girls welcome, then he stood aside and ushered the priest in, closing the door behind him.

The girl led them through to the kitchen and she sat down at the large, oak table.

‘Something to drink?’ she asked. ‘Tea?’

‘Perhaps something a little stronger?’ requested the priest.

Troy opened a cupboard, took out a bottle and showed it to the priest for his approval.

The father registered what it was and nodded his thanks, while at the same time trying not to gawk open mouthed at the treasure the young man held in his hand. It was a bottle of 1762 Gautier Cognac. He was no specialist, but he knew that a bottle like that would retail for over a hundred thousand dollars. He would have swooned had he known that the young couple had over a hundred more bottles of the liquor, courtesy of one of Sylvian’s private cellars.

The young man casually sloshed some into a trio of tumblers. Treating the liquid gold like it was Kool-Aid.

He slid one across the table to the priest and then extended his hand.

‘Name’s Troy,’ he said.

The father took his hand, noting the strength and the rough callouses. The hands of a working man. The grip firm, but nowhere close to how hard the man was obviously capable of squeezing. He felt no need for childish games of macho posturing. His enormous strength was blatantly obvious.

The girl offered her hand next. ‘Emily,’ she said. ‘Some call me, Em.’

The priest blinked when he took her hand. The brief contact told him that the girl’s strength surpassed the male’s by an order of magnitude. She shook his hand with great care, as if she might inadvertently crush his bones if she didn’t concentrate on not doing so.

‘So, priest,’ said Troy. ‘Talk to us.’

Father Dubois took a tentative sip of the cognac and sighed. Ambrosia.

‘I was sent by Knight of the Holy See, Dietz Muller.’

Dubois was about to continue, explaining the why’s and what’s, but before he could, a wave of fear crashed over him and he saw Emily’s eyes change from deep green to a vivid scarlet.

At the same time, Troy growled. A deep, visceral sound that connected directly with Dubois’ amygdala, speaking to him on a primal level. Warning him of life-threatening danger.

It was an utterly inhuman sound.

He dropped his cognac, spilling a couple of thousand dollars’ worth of alcohol onto the kitchen table as his fingers fumbled with fear and his brain went into freefall.

He clutched at the crucifix hanging around his neck and mumbled a prayer.

And then, just like that, the fear receded. Em touched his shoulder.

‘Sorry, father,’ she apologised. ‘We mean no harm; it was simply a shock to hear that name after so many months. Tell us, why did Dietz send you?’

So, father Dubois told them of the two victims.

Neither spoke for a while, then Troy asked. ‘Just out of interest, how did Dietz know where we were, we didn’t tell anyone?’

Dubois chuckled. ‘There are almost twenty million Catholics in France. It is impossible to keep any secrets from the church. Particularly if someone like Dietz Muller is looking for you.’

Emily sighed. ‘Our vacation is over, isn’t it?’

Troy leaned over the table and kissed her. ‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘I’m afraid it is.’ He turned to the priest. ‘Father, take us to see the bodies.’

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CHAPTER 3

Tag put his finger through the hole in his shirt and sighed. He hated getting shot. Especially when he was wearing his fancy duds.

The man who shot him stared open mouthed at the huge Jamaican, then he pointed his pistol at him and fired again, pulling the trigger until the slide racked back. Eleven rounds of 9mm shredded the rest of the big man's shirt and covered his torso in blood.

Tag took a step forward, grabbed his assailant by the neck and squeezed. The attacker batted ineffectually at his arm, but the big man was as strong as ten normal people. This, plus the fact that he was almost impossible to kill, made the ex-yardie an opponent of note.

'That's a silk shirt, asswipe,' growled Tag as he increased pressure until, with a sharp crack, the man's spine shattered. Then he dropped the limp body to the floor and turned to his compatriot.

'Was that the last one?' he asked.

Dietz Muller, vampire hunter and Knight of the Holy See, nodded. 'The last familiar. Now we just need to find the chief bloodsucker, dispatch it, and our work here is done.'

Tag stripped off his blood drenched shirt, dropped it to the floor, drew a pair of massive pistols from his waistband and checked the loads. Each carried ten rounds of silver coated .50 caliber Action Express in an extended mag. Tag had always been a believer in the saying - go large or go home.

'Have you got a spare shirt?' asked Muller.

'Sure,' replied Tag. 'In the car. But I'm not putting it on yet. Only got a couple left.'

Muller nodded his agreement. The knight carried a sawn-off, double barreled shotgun in one hand and a silver sword in the other. Like Tag's weapons, the shotgun was loaded with silver coated slugs. The precious metal an anathema to any vampire.

Muller led the way, treading softly as they crossed the room and headed for the doorway that opened to the basement.

The house wasn't what one might expect when it came to an immortal blood sucking fiend. Middle income, neatly trimmed garden, gas grill out back and a Prius in the driveway. But that was due to the fact that this was a new vampire. Barely weeks old. Not yet having been able to take advantage of decades of long-term investments and sales of antiques to amass any large store of wealth.

But even a young vamp can be dangerous. Their saliva is poisonous,

and their ability to glamor humans, while still relatively weak, was strong enough for it to have recruited two familiars as servants.

And, to be fair, the familiars had tried their best to protect their master while it slept away the daylight hours. But after failing to kill the unkillable Tag, they found themselves at the end of a very short journey. One that concluded with both of them being wiped out by the big man.

Oh well, easy come, easy go. Natural selection.

Muller pushed the door open and crept down the stairs, weapons ready. This wasn't going to be easy, as they wanted to question the newly turned creature before destroying it. It was important to find out who had turned them. Because only an elder can actively turn a human. And elders were extremely dangerous and needed to be hunted down at all costs.

But first, obviously, they needed to be tracked down.

Contrary to popular belief, vampires do not sleep in coffins. In fact, strictly speaking, the older one's do not sleep at all. It is only the newly turned that need any down time. And this is always taken during the hours of daylight. Because, ultraviolet light will genuinely ruin a bloodsucker's day. Terminally.

Muller gestured towards the large, four poster double bed in the center of the room. The new vampire had clearly decided that, despite its previously pedestrian white-collar existence, it would at very least kit it's boudoir out in a fashion that befit a true creature of the night.

There was no other way to describe the basement-become-bedroom than, High Gothic. Everything from black candles in a huge floor standing candelabra, to carved stone gargoyles perched in the corners of the room.

Dark kitsch.

Muller and Tag approached the bed from opposite sides and, on Muller's signal, they tore aside the drapes.

The bed was empty.

The vampire struck Tag like a combine harvester, launching from the shadows in the corner of the room. Fangs and talons slashing and biting and tearing at him. Blood sprayed from deep cuts in Tag's chest and arms as he struggled to bring one of his weapons to bear. But the vamp was too fast for the big man.

Fortunately, before it could strip Tag to the bone, Muller's sword flashed out, catching the bloodsucker a glancing blow to its throat, opening up a gaping wound, but not removing the head.

The vamp fell to the floor, spitting and growling.

Tag used the respite to grab its arms, wrench them behind its back and bind them tight with a length of stout silver chain. Then he wrapped another length of chain around its ankles, pulling hard

enough to cut into its flesh.

The vampire screamed in agony as the silver burned through its undead skin. Muller cuffed it across its face hard enough to slam its head into the floor.

Then he took out a silver flask and held it in front of the vamp's eyes. 'Quiet,' he said. 'Or I'll pour this Holy Water on your face and watch it eat your flesh.'

The vampire, a young female that appeared to be in her late twenties, flinched back. Normally any vampire would scoff at being threatened with Holy Water, for it had little to no effect on them. But most had heard of sergeant Dietz Muller of the Holy See. A knight whose faith was so strong that if he cast Holy Water upon the evil – it burned them with fire.

But she wasn't sure if the stories were mere rumor, or based on fact. Truth be told, it seemed unlikely.

'Now, this is how things are going to proceed,' said Muller. 'I shall ask a question. You shall answer. If you hesitate, or if I find the answer unsatisfactory – Holy Water. However, if you cooperate fully and truthfully.' He held up the silver sword. 'A swift and honorable death.'

The vampire hissed as the chains continued to burn her.

'First, who turned you?' asked Muller.

The vampire stared at him, unblinking. Then she sneered.

The room reverberated with the loud booming sound of Tag's Desert Eagles discharging. Both of the vamp's knees exploded as the fifty caliber rounds destroyed them.

Muller sighed and stared at the big man.

Tag shrugged. 'Sorry,' her mumbled. 'I know it was Holy Water time, but I got pissed. After all, she did cut me up real bad.'

The girl let out a long-drawn-out wail of pain as they waited a few minutes for her knees to heal up.

After they had regenerated, Muller repeated his question. She still didn't answer, but this time, neither did she sneer.

Progress. Albeit small.

The knight uncorked his flask.

'Last chance.'

No reaction.

He tipped the flask up and released a single drop of the liquid onto the vampire's forehead.

'The power of Christ compels me,' he proclaimed as the water fell.

The vampire reacted like she had received a massive electric shock. Thrashing about, gnashing her teeth and grunting in agony.

Tag watched in morbid fascination as the tiny drop of water melted the vampire's flesh and bone, sizzling and popping as it scoured across

her formally flawless skin.

Usually, the creature would heal almost instantly from such a wound, but the Sanctity of Muller's offering did not allow that to happen. The raw wound sizzled and bubbled, slowly etching deeper and deeper as it visited massive amounts of pain upon the evil monster.

'That was one drop,' stated the knight. 'One tiny drop. Next time I will up-end the entire flask onto your face. Now, talk.'

The vamp spent the next ten minutes spilling her guts.

And then the sword fell.

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CHAPTER 4

The village of Voire didn't have a mortuary. It didn't even have a town doctor. But the *gendarme* had gotten around that lack by simply storing the two bodies on a large table in the town butcher's walk-in fridge. Next to the cuts of beef and chicken.

The authorities were supposed to collect the corpses any day now, but with the usual Gallic penchant for procrastination, that time had not yet transpired.

In a token nod to hygiene, the butcher had pinned up a plastic sheet between the bodies and the produce. Problem solved.

Troy leaned over the bodies and sniffed. 'Vampire,' he growled.

Both victims were female. Girls in their late teens. Both had their throats viciously torn open and their pallor, even in death, showed they had been totally exsanguinated.

Emily ran her finger over the wounds. 'Different attackers,' she deduced. 'See the bite marks. This one,' she pointed. 'Most likely female. This one, male. Much bigger. Longer fangs. Older.' She turned to Dubois. 'Show us where the bodies were found.'

The priest nodded and then shrugged. 'It has been a while. A week since the first murder, and two days since the second. I doubt you will find any actionable clues.'

Emily looked at the priest and he flinched under her gaze.

'We shall be the judge of that, father,' she informed him. 'Now, show us. Time marches on and these monsters will strike again, soon. Mark my words.'

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CHAPTER 5

‘I hate this stupid car,’ grumbled Tag.

Muller shrugged. ‘It’s fast, cheap to run and it’s also the only one the Vatican will give us.’

‘I never trust any car that I weigh more than,’ insisted the big man.

Muller didn’t answer. He was used to Tag complaining about the car. But this was Italy, and if they requisitioned a huge 4x4 or a Mercedes saloon, they would stand out. Now, with the small Fiat, they blended in with the locals wherever they went. Of course, as soon as they debussed, they stood out like dog’s balls on a blanket. Expensive tailored suits, handmade shoes, an unmistakable aura of danger and twin thousand-yard stares.

Plus, the fact they both moved like predators. Carnivores roaming the savannah. Leopards seeking prey.

Sharks amongst a shoal of bait fish.

These were men who dealt in death for a living. And it was obvious.

The crucifixes they both openly wore did little to dispatch those fears.

Muller pulled over, stopping the car in a vague approximation of parallel parking. The front of the car nestled up against the rear of the next car and the back stuck out a couple of feet into the road.

Tag had long since stopped advising the Knight on his seeming inability to park correctly. After all, the Italians seemed to find road rules a relatively arbitrary recommendation, as opposed to an actual law. And in all fairness, Tag thought that attitude was pretty cool.

‘This is the address,’ said Muller as he squeezed out of the car and walked around to the trunk to get his jacket and weapons.

Tag followed suit, donning a new shirt at the same time.

The only major difference in their attire was the fact that Muller wore a lightweight bullet proof vest, whereas Tag went *au naturel*. Being shot hurt, but apart from that it had no lasting effect on the big man.

Not counting the ruined shirts, of course.

‘Now this is more like it,’ noted Tag as he looked at the residence they had arrived at.

The manicured garden was visible through a wrought iron fence. As was the house. A hotel sized Baroque Palazzo. All arched windows, pillars and water features.

If you were looking for it, and the two vampire hunters were, it was

obvious that every window was covered with heavy drapes.

There were also two armed guards at the gate, both seated inside an open fronted guard house. One of them was smoking. The other, eating a sausage that was so redolent of garlic it made Tags eye's water, even from twenty feet away.

'I thought vamps didn't like garlic,' he murmured to Muller.

'Why?'

Tag shrugged. 'Just thought it. Isn't that what everyone says?'

'Maybe,' admitted the knight. 'But then everyone most likely has never actually seen a real vampire.'

'True. So, what now?'

'We could scout the place first. Check if the bloodsucker was telling the truth before we go in.'

'Nah,' disagreed the big Jamaican. 'There's no way she was lying. Never seen someone in such pain. She spoke the truth, bet my life on it.'

'I reckon you're correct,' concurred Muller. 'In that case, let's ask nicely if they can let us in.'

'And if they don't?'

'We kill them and let ourselves in,' answered Muller, as he tucked his crucifix inside his shirt.

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CHAPTER 6

‘Father,’ said Emily. ‘Thank you for bringing us here, now I advise you to leave.’

Dubois looked puzzled. ‘Why?’

Troy grinned. ‘Things are about to get weird,’ he said. ‘We need to look for clues. Anything that may give us a lead. And with the time that has passed, the only way for us to be able to do that is to use our … enhanced senses, shall we say.’

‘Magic?’

Emily shook her head. ‘Not really. How much did Muller actually tell you about Troy and I?’

‘He said you had the knowledge to help with these murders,’ answered the priest. ‘He said you knew about vampires and had worked with him before. I assumed you had something to do with the Vatican and the Knights of the Holy See.’

‘Partly true,’ acknowledged Em. ‘But we have no connection with the church. Look, if you insist on staying, the best way to explain is simply to show you. But I warn you, your life will never be the same again. Are you prepared for that?’

Dubois nodded. ‘Information is power,’ he said. ‘I will not shy away from anything that might help me fight this evil that stalks our land.’

Em nodded and then turned to Troy. ‘Do it.’

The young man checked that there was no one around and he started to disrobe.

Dubois took a step backwards, but before he could ask why Troy was taking his clothes off, Em held up her hand to stay him.

As Troy stripped, he passed each item of clothing to Emily, who folded it neatly and placed it on the fence that ran along the stretch of road where the most recent victim’s body had been discovered.

Dubois couldn’t help but notice the naked young man in front of him seemed to have been constructed out of steel and leather. His muscles were so ripped that he looked like some sort of model for an anatomical lecture at a medical school. Rock hard muscles that were obviously forged outside of any gym. Long limbed, rangy and defined to the point of impossibility.

But before he could fully register Troy’s physical prowess, Dubois’s eyes started watering. It was as if the physical form in front of him was melting and reforming. Light bent and a shimmering wave of color rippled across his vision. He rubbed his eyes with the heels of

his hands in an attempt to clear his sight – and when he opened his eyes again …

'Holy mother of God,' exclaimed the priest as he took two hurried steps backwards, stumbled over his own feet and fell to the floor.

Because there was no longer a young man standing in front of him.

Instead, he saw a wolf the size of a horse.

It's fur as black as a moonless night, its eyes still the same golden yellow that Troy's were, teeth the size of daggers and claws like sharpened meat hooks.

Then it growled. And Dubois felt like someone had taken hold of his amygdala and connected directly with his primal self, sending him a message.

And the message was – beware. You are in the presence of the ultimate predator.

The very top of the food chain.

Werewolf.

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CHAPTER 7

‘Hey, guard people,’ Tag yelled at the two sentries. ‘Can we come in? We wanna kill your blood sucking master, that okay with you?’

Muller shook his head and sighed. Something he tended to do quite a lot since he had started working with the huge Jamaican. What had started off as a few weeks of sightseeing, rest and recuperation after their last great battle in London, had turned into a full-time vampire hunting partnership that had been going over a year now.

And in all fairness, Tag was very good at what he did. The only problem was his overwhelming penchant for getting up in people’s faces. An obvious habit carried over from his days as a street thug in London. He believed that the only real way to get people’s attention and respect was to go at them like a bullet out of a gun.

The pair of guards stared at the big man like he was insane. Then the one shook his head.

‘No, vattene. Non sei benvenuto qui. Idiota.’

Both of them drew their pistols.

Tag turned to Muller. ‘What he say?’

‘He said no,’ translated the knight. ‘And he called you an idiot.’

Tag shrugged. ‘Oh well, I tried.’ He pulled out one of his Desert Eagles, removed an oversized suppressor from his jacket pocket, screwed it on while the sentries regarded him with disbelieving expressions, and shot both of them in the face. ‘There,’ he said. ‘That’s for having an evil, murdering SOB for a boss.’

Then he removed the suppressor, pocketed it, replaced his pistol in his waistband, walked up to the wrought iron gate, spat on his hands, grabbed hold of it and started to apply some pressure.

Muller watched as the big man took the strain and, slowly, ripped the massive gate from its hinges.

Tag had always been a strong man. And that was before the mad professor had juiced him up with a potion that had initially killed him, then brought him back to life as a near immortal. Subsequently, the Prof had gone totally over the top and used Tag as an unkillable experimental human lab rat, plying him with a raft of potentially deadly concoctions to measure their effects.

And the one effect had been gifting the big man with superhuman strength.

As was blatantly apparent when he tore the huge gate off its mountings and cast it into the road.

‘Come on,’ he said to Muller. ‘Let’s go do some good.’

The two hunters strode up the crushed marble driveway towards the front door, drawing their respective weapons as they did.

‘Look, Tag,’ said Muller. ‘Shooting those two men like that, was that absolutely necessary?’

‘What should I have done?’

‘I’m not sure, it’s just, well, you didn’t even try to give them an alternative.’

‘Muller, my friend, they had their guns out, they work for a vamp and we needed to get past them. There was no way things were going down in a peaceful fashion. No matter how much we would have liked them to.’

‘True. But be careful when we get into the house. There could be servants that are innocent with no idea they’re actually working for a lord of the dark.’

Tag nodded. ‘Okay, boss. I get it. No more shooting people inna face.’

‘Unless you have to,’ concluded Muller.

‘Unless I have to,’ agreed Tag.

By now they had arrived at the door.

‘Should I knock?’ asked the big man.

Muller nodded.

Tag took a run up and smashed through the oaken doors like they were Hollywood breakaways.

Muller allowed himself a quiet chuckle. Sometimes it was useful having a human battering ram as a hunting partner.

The hunters found themselves in a large entrance hall. It was your standard, no expense spared elder bloodsucker décor. Old masters on the walls, crystal chandeliers, Persian carpets, dim lighting and rubber backed drapes on all the windows.

There was likely to be a bevy of familiars. Depending on how paranoid the vamp was, those familiars could include as many as ten protectors or as little as two. There was often a cleaner, butler, driver and gardener. Vampires had no need of a chef.

A young woman entered the entrance hall via one of the side doors, obviously coming to check on the commotion. She was dressed in a classic maid’s outfit. Taking one look at the intruders, she squealed and cowered against the wall.

‘Now, you see,’ said Muller, gesturing towards the terrified girl. ‘This is one of those cases where it’s not necessary to shoot anyone in the face.’

‘Fine,’ replied Tag. ‘I get it.’

They turned their backs on the girl and started to proceed up the stairs, guessing that the master of the house would be in one of the

main suites on the next floor.

As they walked away, the girl pulled up her skirt to reveal a thigh-holster, drew a compact Glock pistol and started firing.

Two rounds struck Muller. Both of them were defeated by his body armor. The next three rounds hit Tag, punching into his left arm and shoulder.

'Dammit,' he shouted as he trained his Desert Eagle on the girl and pulled the trigger twice. Both rounds struck her in the chest, picking her up, throwing her across the room and painting the wall with her blood. 'You see,' he yelled at Muller. 'I should have shot her inna face.'

Muller frowned. 'Sorry,' he apologized. 'Who would have thought?'

'Me,' snapped Tag. 'I would have thought. Anyone who works for a vampire is bad news. And don't give me that – they might not know their master is a blood sucking monster. When your boss is mortally allergic to sunlight, doesn't eat anything except human blood and is a thousand years old – you gotta be terminally stupid to assume he is anything but a vampire.'

Muller didn't argue. After all, Tag was mostly correct. But, as a member of the Holy Church, Muller's job as a hunter was at odds with killing humans. He understood that all familiars had to be exterminated along with their masters, but it pained him nonetheless.

So, he allowed Tag his rave, and then led the way up the stairs, keeping his shotgun ready as now any form of surprise was well blown.

As they reached the landing, someone kicked open one of the doors leading off the corridor and opened up with a sub machine gun. Fortunately, they fired too soon, snatching at the trigger and pulling their aim high. The bullets stitched a line of potential death cross the wall above the hunter's heads.

Muller's shotgun boomed in response, punching the attacker back into the room. With practiced fingers, the knight reloaded his sawn-off double barrel.

Tag saw another door start to open and he fired into it, the huge .50 caliber rounds smashing through and dispatching the assailant in a welter of blood and bone chips.

Muller's shotgun boomed again, cutting down two uniformed men armed with pistols. Reloading swiftly, he fired again, ensuring that the men were dead.

'End of the corridor,' he shouted.

Tag nodded his agreement. At the end of the long corridor were a set of intricately carved double doors. Whoever resided behind those was obviously either a guest of note, or the Master himself.

Making their way down the corridor, they kicked open doors and

cleared rooms as they went. They came across one more familiar. Kitted out in a dress suit and bow tie he was most likely the butler. He also carried an M16. But before he could crank any rounds off, Tag shot him twice. In the face.

'Time to do your battering ram thing again,' said Muller.

Tag grinned, pushed his pistols back into his belt and launched himself at the double doors. He struck them at full speed to the accompaniment of a loud cracking sound. Unfortunately, it was the sound of his right arm and shoulder breaking against the oak covered steel doors.

Falling to the floor he started cussing. A long uninterrupted string of every swear word he could think of. Then he made a few up.

A couple of minutes later his remarkable gift had ensured he was a hundred percent again.

'That did not work out like it was meant to,' he stated.

Muller studied the door closely, looking for any structural weaknesses.

'Maybe you could melt the locks out with Holy Water,' suggested Tag.

The knight didn't bother answering. Finally, he nodded and looked up. 'That door is impenetrable,' he said.

'Now what?'

'You think you could smash your way through an interconnecting wall instead?' asked the knight.

Tag shrugged. 'If it was only one brick thick. I doubt this old house is dry walled.'

'Fine, let's go into this adjacent room and try.'

'Okay.'

The two men proceeded to the next room. Firstly, they moved the bed aside, giving Tag a free run at the wall. Then Muller loaded his shotgun with solid slugs and Tag checked his mags were full.

Next, before the big man hit the wall, they marked out a two-foot circle about four feet from the ground and emptied their weapons into it, blasting off the plaster and chipping into the brick structure beneath.

As soon as they finished, they reloaded and Tag set himself.

Grunting with effort he ran full tilt into the wall, hitting it with his shoulder like a running back hitting a tackle bag.

Over three-hundred-pounds-of-angry struck the wall like an artillery shell, smashing through the bricks and barreling into the next room, roaring incoherently at the top of his voice.

Muller followed, bringing his shotgun to bear on the only occupant in the room. A man of late middle age, dark hand crafted suit, slicked back salt and pepper hair, douchebag pencil moustache, eyes like

black pebbles and a set of long and very obvious fangs protruding past his obscenely red lips. On his hip, a sheathed rapier.

'Goodness me,' he said. 'How very impressive. That, I did not expect.'

'Not surprising,' said Tag. 'No one expects the Tag-man to come through their bedroom wall.'

The vampire chuckled. 'Very true, young man.' Then he pulled out a gold-plated Colt 45 and shot Tag in the chest. Twice.

'Don't do that,' yelled Tag. 'I got no spare shirts left.'

The vampire shot him again and raised an eyebrow in astonishment. 'My, this is a day full of surprises,' he said. 'What are you?'

'I'm not a what,' replied Tag. 'I'm a who. Tag be my name; you blood sucking fiend.'

Now, that is just rude,' responded the vampire. 'And who might you be?' he asked Muller.

'I might be Bugs Bunny,' replied Muller. 'But I'm not. I'm actually sergeant Dietz Muller, Knight of the Holy See.'

'Muller the Pious,' breathed the vampire. 'That is unfortunate.'

'For who?' asked Muller.

'Well, for me, of course. Your reputation precedes you. I may be old and powerful, but I am no fool. Many have attempted to stand against you. None have succeeded. Looks like my run has come to an end. However, I hope you don't mind, but I shall not go gentle into that good night. I shall fight.' He drew his rapier.

But before the vampire could do anything, Tag drew both Eagles and opened up, hitting him with six .50 caliber, silver jacketed rounds. All six struck him in his right temple, expanded to almost a full inch in diameter and exited via his left temple, taking most of the contents of his skull and the entire left side of his head with them.

Then Muller stepped forward and, with a single swing of his sword, he decapitated the demon.

Both hunters stared at the body for a few seconds.

'That was a little anticlimactic,' said Muller.

'Yeah,' agreed Tag. 'And now I ain't got no shirts.'

Muller chuckled at his friend's discomfort.

'You know,' mused Tag. 'This is the first ancient we've found in Italy for a while. I must admit, I thought we had killed them all after the last great battle. Let's face it, the Italian and British branches of the *Nosferatu* were all but extinguished.'

Muller nodded. 'I agree. But this vampire, he wasn't Italian.'

'How do you know?' asked Tag. 'After all, when they're that old they don't have any real discerning accent as such.'

Muller shook his head. 'Not true. Most retain some semblance of their original dialect. Or at least they talk in such a way that favors

their favorite area of abode.'

'This bloodsucker sounded like an upper-class Brit,' said Tag.

Again, Muller shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'He talked like someone who wanted to sound like an upper-class Brit. Think of Sir William, that is what a true British noble sounds like, and he sounded nothing like this idiot. This ancient was more Dick Van Dyke than Prince William.'

'What you saying, mister Knight?'

'I'm not sure. But I think we should investigate this house a little before we go. See if we can get any more leads on this vampire's background. There's something going on here and I don't like it. Not at all.'

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CHAPTER 8

Father Dubois gave up. He had been pedaling as fast as he could in an attempt to follow Troywolf and Emily. But it was to no avail. They ran faster than a motorbike. Faster than a racing car.

And at the same time, Troy had his nose to the ground, following a trail of scent.

The priest took a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped the sweat from his face. If he was honest with himself, he was actually relieved he was unable to keep up with the beautiful blonde and the huge werewolf.

He knew they were on his side, a Knight of the Holy See had assured him, but that didn't mean the two strange people – creatures? – did not cause him undue stress. Fear even.

For it was difficult to be in the presence of such raw power and not feel utterly, helplessly intimidated.

Troywolf kept running. The trail was strong, the stench of vampire easy to track. And next to him, Emily ran – her movements smooth and effortless. She carried Troy's clothes in a small rucksack, along with her cell phone, some water and a pack of beef jerky. No weapons.

After many months, they were hunting again.

And the enemy would tremble with their coming.

Em was quite capable of going wolf if she needed to, having absorbed the ability after crossing over to the river Styx with a deceased pack alpha, and returning with Troy's help. As well as this, she was the world's only Daywalker. A vampire no longer constrained by either daylight or the need for human blood.

However, as gifted as she was, Troy was the Omega wolf. The Alpha of alphas. Leader of all of the werewolf packs. A position he had inherited from Sir William. This meant he had an ability that allowed him to morph into wolfman mode, a humanoid wolf creature, as well as a normal werewolf.

And, as Omega, his ability to track was beyond superlative. Even now, as they ran, he was using scent to track the vampire from the last murder. Despite the incident having occurred a couple of days prior, and the vampire had used a car to leave the scene.

This was a feat beyond Emily's capabilities.

They ran through back lanes and country roads. Past vineyards, small farms and the odd farmhouse. As always, Em marveled at the

beauty of the structured landscape of the French wine region. Gentle hills covered with grape vines, green grass, oaks and chestnut trees. She could sense small packs of wild pigs, the odd deer, rabbits and various game birds.

Troywolf stopped, raised his head, growled softly and looked up at a house on a nearby hill. A three story, white, villa with a couple of towers, a high stone wall, sculpted gardens, nestled in amongst ancient grape vines. Not quite a grand Chateau, but very close. Perhaps the size of a decent boutique hotel. Most likely, twenty bedrooms, a ballroom, and a smattering of rooms for entertainment.

Troywolf morphed into his wolfman mode. Standing upright, almost eight feet tall. Muscles on top of more muscles, as though an impatient sculptor had packed them on using raw concrete as opposed to smoothly chiseling marble.

The wolfman had assumed his more humanoid form because he found it easier to verbally communicate that way. Even though it was possible for him and Emily to talk mentally, that was more via thoughts and feelings. Pack communication. Verbal was more human. A more accurate way to transfer complex decisions and details.

'He's up there,' growled Troy. 'In the fancy house. I can smell it from here. But he's not alone. There are others. Vampires. Humans, most likely familiars. Even grinders.'

'How many?' asked Emily.

'Many,' grunted Troy. 'I would have to get closer to give an accurate figure.'

Emily thought for a while. 'Right,' she said. 'Now, or should we wait until night?'

The wolfman shrugged. 'Easier to remain concealed at night. But then again, that is when the bloodsuckers are at their most vigilant. Six of one, half a dozen of the other. Your call.'

'We go tonight,' decided Emily. 'After all, we're simply scouting, quick in and out, see how many vamps there are, get a more accurate lay of the land. We can make a more informed decision after that.'

Troy nodded his agreement and the two of them found a shady spot to settle down until the night came.

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CHAPTER 9

After they had recced the vampire's mansion, Emily and Troy had visited the site of the first victim. And although that had taken place almost two weeks before, it took Troy mere seconds to confirm that although it was a different combination of scents, there was a similar base note.

A group of at least three vamps, one of them being the same one that killed the second victim.

By then it was approaching midnight and they headed home.

'Okay,' said Em. 'From what we can tell, there's a master, at least four younger vampires, more than ten grinders and a similar number of familiars.

'And judging from the mix of scents you picked up, the elder is taking his brood out to feed,' said Emily. 'They must be fairly new. Still learning.'

'We can take them,' said Troy as he lit a cigarette. He knew Emily didn't like the cancer sticks, but all werewolves smoked. After all, dread disease didn't affect them. Drink, drugs, Tobacco – not a problem. Lung cancer, liver problems and heart failure were for mortals.

Emily shrugged and took a sip of her wine. They were sitting in their kitchen, going over the info they had gathered just a couple of hours earlier.

'Probably,' she admitted. 'But there is a lot of them.'

'So?'

'So, what if you get hurt? Or worse. A master bites you and turns you. I'm fine, you can't turn the already turned. But if something happened to you.' She shook her head and her eyes shone with unshed tears.

Troy took a drag, exhaled, grimaced and sighed. He hated it when Emily insinuated she was a vampire. Technically, he had to admit, she was. But she didn't drink human blood and she could walk in the daylight. So, vampire? Not so much.

'I can take care of myself, Em. Is this because of the last battle?' he asked.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, what happened before, all of the deaths, none of that was your fault. We were Pack, we fought, some of us died. But we won. We exterminated the UK and Italian branches of the *Nosferatu*. We

have rested, now it's time to get back in the fight. It's what we do.'

'But did we win?' asked Emily.

'Yes,' affirmed Troy. 'Pack members died, true. But some of us survived. None of the enemy did.'

'I don't know how you can just ignore it,' noted Emily. 'Not a day, not an hour goes by without me thinking about one of them. All of them. Our friends. Our family. I'm not sure I can go through anything like that again, Troy.'

'*Life is suffering. To suffer is to live*,' stated Troy, repeating the pack motto. 'I'm not being callous, Em. I haven't forgotten. I too think of them all the time. But they died doing what they were meant to do. As warriors. Soldiers of the light. And as such will I remember them. With joy, and love. Not with sorrow and regret. It is the only way to truly honor them.

'We must be strong. Remember – *The strength of the wolf is the pack. And the strength of the pack is the wolf*.'

'There is no longer any pack,' whispered Emily.

She was surprised to hear the Omega chuckle. 'There is always pack, my darling. We may be diminished, but we exist. The pack may be widespread, but as Omega, I feel them. If I called, they would come, wherever they are, whatever country. There is always pack.'

The Omega stubbed his cigarette out and was about to speak again when he stopped. 'Car coming.'

Emily nodded her agreement. 'This place is like Grand Central,' she quipped. 'No one visits for almost a year, and now it's party time.'

Troy laughed again. 'I'd hardly call two visits, party-time.'

Emily stuck her tongue out at him. 'You know what I mean.'

'Whoever they are,' said Troy. 'They're definitely heading this way. Let's go outside, see who they could be.'

Emily nodded, turned off the house lights and the two of them ghosted out of the front door, disappearing into the shadows. Waiting.

A small Fiat bounced up the driveway, riding hard on its obviously overloaded suspension. It pulled up in front of the house, a huge man squeezed out of the passenger side and stretched.

Emily screamed. 'Tag.'

The big man turned to face her, and his face split into a wide grin. 'Hey, baby girl,' he shouted. 'Long time no see.'

Emily ran up and threw her arms around him, tears of joy rolling down her cheeks.

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CHAPTER 10

Emily sipped the cup of strong, super-sweet milky tea Tag brewed for her. At first, she'd hated the industrial strength, syrupy concoction the big man called tea. But after a while it became her favorite drink. And it was only fairly recently she discovered the Jamaican spiked every pot with a pinch of marijuana.

But she didn't care. Because she knew, the more Tag liked you, the sweeter he made your tea. And that picked up her spirits and reminded her that, aside from Troy of course, she had other people who loved her. People who put her above themselves.

What Emily didn't realize was the fact that every surviving Pack member felt the same way as Tag. All of them would lay down their lives for her without question.

But then none of them made tea like the big man.

'So, how come you wearing a jacket with no shirt?' Troy asked the Jamaican.

Tag scowled. 'Because the boss keeps letting vamps shoot me. Now I run outa shirts. And they weren't cheap.'

'They were free,' interjected Muller. 'Courtesy of the Vatican tailors.'

'Yeah, but that still don't mean they was cheap,' insisted Tag. 'They cost me in blood and pain and pain.'

'You said pain twice,' quipped Muller.

'Of course,' agreed Tag. 'That's because it was really, really painful. You try getting shot like a hundred times. It sucks.'

'Vampires suck,' said Troy.

Tag banged the table. 'That true, boy,' he yelled as he laughed out loud. 'That true. Now, baby girl, talk to Tag about your local vamps.'

So Em and Troy laid out what had happened so far.

'Well, now that you got reinforcements,' stated Tag. 'We all good to go. I say we tool up and go waste those blood suckers, ASAP.'

Troy grinned. 'I'm in, big man. No time like the present.'

Muller and Em looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

'It's like dealing with a pair of kindergarten children,' said Em.

Muller grinned. 'At least they're keen. And I suppose they're correct. If it's going to happen, it might as well happen as soon as possible. Before the monsters strike again.'

And Em couldn't argue with that logic.

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CHAPTER 11

The next morning the sun rose on the four hunters. An explosion of pink and purple and blue, painting the sky like a child with an unlimited palette.

They scaled the wall surrounding the mansion with laughable ease, and now they stood in the shadows, planning their next step.

'I've always been in favor of just going in through the front door and shooting everyone who gets in the way,' whispered Tag.

'Simple is good,' added Muller. 'Less to go wrong.'

'I think we should split up,' interjected Troy. 'We can do more damage that way.'

'I agree,' concurred Emily. 'Troy and I will hit the back door, Tag, you and Muller go through the front. Clear room by room, meet in the entrance hall. Then together we take the next floor. Anyone you see is most likely the enemy, so don't hesitate to take them out. There may be innocent prisoners being kept for feeding, but they'll be locked up. So, we hit hard and fast. Ready?'

'Ready like Freddy,' answered Tag.

Troy and Muller simply nodded.

Em stood up and adjusted her weapons. Like Tag, she favored the Desert Eagle pistol. However, as her hands were a lot smaller, she plumped for the 357-magnum version instead of the massive 50 cal.

Emily also had the ability to call on her battleax – Death walker. Summoning it from another dimension where it always waited for her, ready to feast on the blood of the evil ones.

Muller had his usual shotgun and sword combination.

Tag sported a pair of Eagles plus a set of webbing with extra mags and half a dozen V40 mini hand grenades, each the size of a golf ball. The mini-frags were perfect for room clearing.

Troy stripped down and changed into his wolfman form. He carried no weapons because he was Omega. Which meant he was the ultimate weapon.

With a nod, Em and Troy sprinted around the back of the mansion. Tag and Muller counted off twenty seconds and Tag did his battering ram thing, smashing the front door off its hinges and barreling into the entrance hall.

A human guard stood at the bottom of the sweeping stairway. He was dressed in a black uniform and carried a Heckler and Koch sub machine gun. Before he could bring it to bear, Muller hit him with

both barrels of his sawn-off, throwing him backwards onto the stairs.

'Go left,' he shouted at Tag. 'I'll go this way. As soon as you've cleared your area, sound off and come back here.'

Tag nodded and strode off, both pistols drawn and ready.

He walked past an open pair of double doors and peered inside. An empty ballroom, in the corner a raised platform with a grand piano. Dull lighting, heavy drapes. Vampire 101.

Further along, a closed door. He kicked it open. A large sitting room. Probably referred to as a withdrawing room or something equally as fancy-pants. Also, empty.

Another door. Another sitting room. Empty.

'Hell, how much sitting do these people need to do?' Tag muttered to himself as he kicked open another door.

A study. A bespectacled man sitting behind a large desk. In front of the man, a computer screen. He looked up and frowned. 'You are not to be allowed in here,' he said in a strong Eastern European accent. 'Not without the permission of the master.'

'No shit? You a vampire?'

'Does you have ever seen a vampire wearing the eyeglasses?'

'No.'

'That does answers your question very much,' continued the man as he massacred his English grammar. 'Now for to look, to be obvious, you are new. But security staff must stick to their posts, they do not ever to go to wandering around. The master will punish you. Last warning for you, now leave.'

'You Polish?' questioned the big man. 'You sound Polish. Or something like that.'

'Get out, you big idiot.'

Tag shot the familiar in the face and closed the door behind him. He heard the boom of Muller's shotgun from the opposite end of the house and he grinned. They were doing business.

The final room was a large old-fashioned kitchen. Wood fired stoves, butchers chopping blocks and large tables. Also, four humans.

A female in a chef's hat, holding a cleaver. Two men in some sort of striped uniform and another uniformed guard.

The chef reacted first, throwing her cleaver at the big man.

Tag dodged to one side and fired, starting with the armed guard and moving left to right.

Four shots, four bodies.

He turned and jogged back towards the entrance hall, shouting as he did so.

'Clear.'

Seconds after he arrived, Muller ran in. He had a few spots of blood on his face and the collar of his shirt. It wasn't his.

‘A couple of guards and someone who looked like a chauffeur,’ reported Muller.

‘One guard, an accountant with a funny accent and some cooks,’ replied Tag. ‘Should we start with the next floor?’

‘No,’ Muller shook his head. ‘Em told us to wait here.’

As he answered they heard a scream of agony ring out from the other end of the building.

The side Troy and Emily were attacking.

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CHAPTER 12

Troy followed as Emily ran to the back of the building. She had expected the back door to lead to the kitchen, as that was the usual layout on houses such as these. Instead, they found what appeared to be a residential wing. A long bungalow attached to the rear of the building; all the windows covered with the standard heavy drapes.

The two of them proceeded to the back door. It was locked. Emily opened it by simply grasping the handle and turning until the mechanism shattered. Then she pushed it open and they went in.

A long corridor. No lights. Five doors on the one side of the corridor, two on the opposite.

Troy sniffed. Gestured towards the five doors. 'Vampires,' he growled. 'Fairly new ones.' Then he nodded at the first of the two opposite doors, both of them were bound in steel reinforcing. 'Grinders in the first one. Lots of them. That one, humans. They smell terrified. Most likely food.'

'Looks like the prisoners and the grinder's doors are locked from the outside,' noted Emily, pointing out the massive padlocks on the two doors.

'So, we take the vamps out first,' suggested Troy.

Emily nodded. 'I doubt their doors are locked, let's try for quiet. A door each.'

Troy nodded and tried the first door. Then he shook his head. 'Locked from the inside.'

'Well, there goes quiet,' said Emily. 'Okay, let's go in hard and fast. On three. One, two,' she kicked open the first door while Troy smashed straight through his.

The room was pitch black, but Emily could see as if it were daylight. A young woman lay on a large double bed. She looked like she was in her early twenties. Emily could smell her fetid stench from across the room. A base note of rotting meat with a top note of acetone. The product of a protein-only diet combined with the fact they were undead.

Emily drew her two pistols and fired four times. Every shot struck the vamp in the center of her forehead. There was a reason Tag always shot people '*inna face*' as he put it. It was the only way to take a vamp down with any real chance of success.

Then she ran across the room, holstering her weapons as she did so and, with a mere thought, she summoned Deathwalker. A casual

swing and the vampires head leaped across the room like someone had punted it.

Turning fast, she banished the ax, drew her pistols and ran to the next room.

She could hear Troy savaging his chosen target, the sound of breaking bones and tearing flesh plainly audible from the next room. Before Emily reached the next door, it slammed open and a young man blurred out, moving as fast as only a vampire or werewolf could.

Supremely confident in his speed, the young vamp launched himself at Emily.

But to the Daywalker it was as if she were being attacked in slow motion. Drawing her pistols, she had more than enough time to pull off two rounds, hitting him in the chest and halting his forward motion with a pair of silver coated, .357 expanding rounds travelling at over 1700 feet per second.

As the young bloodsucker crashed to a halt, Emily stepped forward and delivered a perfect spinning roundhouse kick, striking him immediately below his bullet wounds with enough force to shatter all of his ribs and his spine. He sailed across the corridor and struck the opposite wall, fracturing his skull as he did so.

Emily summoned her ax again and beheaded him.

She turned to the next door, but saw Troy was standing in the middle of the corridor, a severed head in his one paw.

'It's done,' he growled as he dropped the head. 'What now.'

'The grinders, said Emily, swinging her ax and hacking off the padlock.

As she did so, the door exploded open and a clutch of screaming, deformed and filthy Grinders sprinted out of the room, slavering and keening as they came.

Grinders were a foe worth taking seriously. They were the detritus left over when a master vampire tried to turn a human unsuccessfully. Only a small percentage of humans were successfully turned. Most died, a large percentage became Grinders, and only a few made it to full bloodsucker.

When they became Grinders, the process cooked their brains and deformed their bodies. But at the same time, it imparted outlandish strength, speed and healing abilities.

Emily fired off her remaining ammo, dropped the pistols and brought Deathwalker into play.

The double-bladed ax blurred into constant motion. A ballet of blood and dismemberment.

Troy, who had fought alongside Emily many times before, moved in concert with her, striking where she missed, covering her back and ripping into the dozen or so Grinders with controlled savagery.

The battle took place at such superhuman speeds that it lasted mere seconds. In that time, Troy and Emily had dispatched, with great prejudice, thirteen fully developed Grinders.

Troy checked out the remains and then relaxed, satisfied that there was no longer a threat.

Emily, however, kept swinging her ax. Dicing and slicing the already dismembered bodies. Blood sprayed and pieces of flesh flew around the corridor as she lost herself to the divine madness of battle. The berserk killing rage she was prone to enter since she had become the Daywalker.

Reveling in the death and dismemberment.

The ultimate killing machine.

'Emily,' growled the Omega. 'Stop.'

Emily turned to Troy, her eyes glowing with madness, her face split into a mirthless grin as the blood and gore dripped from her hair and body.

'Enough,' shouted Troy.

Slowly, the insanity drained from her. And her human side reasserted itself.

Troy stepped forward and took her in his arms, growling softly as he did so.

'Sorry,' whispered Emily. 'It's been so long, I forgot how to retain my control.'

'No worries,' said Troy. 'It's what we do. Now let's go find Tag and Muller and finish this.'

'What about the prisoners?' asked Emily.

'I reckon they're safer locked away for now,' said Troy. 'After we've killed the master, we'll come back for them. Maybe phone father Dubois to come and help.'

Emily nodded. 'Let's do it.'

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CHAPTER 13

‘Hey, baby girl,’ said Tag. ‘You okay? You get cut?’

Emily shook her head.

‘She’s fine,’ interjected Troy. ‘Just got a bit carried away. We ran into a crowd of grinders and Em introduced them to Deathwalker.’

‘We heard the screams,’ noted Muller. ‘Looks like it’s all clear on this floor, you ready to move on?’

Emily nodded along with the rest of them. But Tag could see she was upset. He knew she hated it when her dark side came to the fore. And although he was quite prepared to die for her, there was little he could do to help the internal battle she would have to fight for the rest of her living days.

Because, when Nathan Tremblay, the Shadowhunter traitor turned vampire, had bitten Emily, he had gifted her with greater power than ever, he had also cursed her by bathing her soul in darkness. If she had not been such an inherently good person, she would have already succumbed to the power of the dark, so powerful was its call.

So, it came to pass, the being that was mankind’s most effective weapon against the dark, had the potential to also be evil’s greatest ally.

Tag and Muller led the way up the stairs.

Two guards waited at the top, hidden behind a large pillar in the center of the landing. One of them fired his pistol and managed to hit Tag in the shoulder before a fusillade of shots from both of the hunters cut them down.

Tag cussed while he waited for his flesh to knit back together.

The floor was strangely designed. The one side of the landing was open plan, densely covered by indoor plants. Due to the lack of natural light, the plants were radically etiolated. Unhealthy and stringy. More post-apocalyptic nightmare than peaceful greenhouse resting place.

On the right-hand side, a single oversized door.

Tag was about to go full battering ram when Muller leaned over and tried the handle.

‘It’s not locked,’ he said.

‘On three,’ said Tag.

He counted down and Tag and Muller burst into the room, followed closely by Troy and Emily.

They entered a single room. Huge. The entire right-hand side of the

building.

It was a bedroom. A humongous bed graced the center of the room. Ridiculously large. Maybe ten times the size of a normal double. Complete with four posts, swags, drapes and countless overstuffed pillows and cushions.

There was a dressing table, a smattering of occasional chairs and another batch of the oddly unhealthy pot plants.

In front of the bed stood a man. Long silver hair slicked back into a tight pony tail. Clean shaven. He wore a silk maroon smoking jacket, black velvet trousers and carpet slippers.

In his left hand he held a pipe. A Meerschaum, ala Sherlock Holmes.

'Nice pipe,' said Tag.

The man smiled, exposing his long, glittering canines. '*Merci*,' he replied. 'It is always pleasant to meet a connoisseur.'

And then a wave of coercion crashed over both Tag and Muller, driving them to their knees as any form of personal choice was taken from them by the vampire's powerful glamor.

It was immediately apparent that this was no normal vamp. The fact he could so casually nullify both Tag and a Knight of the Holy See, meant he must be more than a mere Master. Most likely an Elder. Or perhaps even an ancient, a vampire in excess of a thousand years old.

'How pitiful,' he sneered. 'A pair of humans dare to take me on. It would be laughable if it were not so insulting. Now,' he continued. 'Time to die...'

But before he could do anything, Emily stepped forward, conjuring Deathwalker as she did so.

The vampire looked up and blanched, involuntarily taking two unsteady steps backwards as raw fear etched itself across his features.

'The Daywalker,' he croaked. Then he looked at Troy. 'And the Omega.' He dropped his pipe and held up his hands. 'Wait,' he shouted. 'This does not have to end badly. I have information. Important information. Spare me and I shall give it to you.'

Tag and Muller stood up, no longer held by the ancient's glamor.

Troy growled.

Emily smiled. 'You will tell me what I want, regardless of whether I let you live or not.'

And she unleashed the full might of her coercion.

The ancient was driven to his knees as a tsunami of mental power crashed over him. Unfortunately, the amount of power was so great it drove both Tag and Muller to the floor once again. But this time their ears and noses started bleeding; such was the strength of Emily's mind control.

'Mercy. I will talk. *S'il te plaît, arête*,' he croaked in French. 'Please stop.'

‘Emily,’ shouted Troy. ‘Stop.’

‘No! No mercy.’

Troy grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her to face Tag and Muller. Both of them writhing on the floor in agony.

Emily flinched and immediately dropped her glamor.

The hunters let out sighs of release, and the ancient, who had been the target of Emily’s aggression, let out a low moan of relief.

‘That’s twice now,’ yelled Tag. ‘And it’s your fault,’ he said, pointing at the vampire. Swearing under his breath, the big man pulled out a pistol and shot the vamp in his left elbow. A painful wound but not at all debilitating. Particularly as an ancient will heal up almost instantly.

Muller raised an eyebrow. ‘Feel better now?’

Tag nodded. ‘Much. Thanks.’ Then he turned to Emily. ‘Tell you what, girly,’ he said. ‘What say Muller and I get out of the room while you question this butt hole? Then you can tell us what he said afterwards. That way you won’t explode our eyes by mistake or something.’

Emily nodded, shamefaced at the blunder that had caused her friends such pain.

Troy stalked over to the vampire and grabbed him by his neck to ensure he didn’t try to escape. Then with a head gesture he motioned for Tag and Muller to leave the room.

Emily banished Deathwalker, stood closer to the vamp and, once more, lashed out with her coercion.

It was time to see what he knew.

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CHAPTER 14

The ancient vampire had obviously harbored a penchant for young girls. Every one of the human prisoners being kept for feeding were female, between the ages of sixteen and twenty.

There were nine of them. Some French, but mainly foreign tourists. Backpackers touring Europe. Looking for adventure.

Now they were mere shadows of themselves. Terrified and malnourished.

Father Dubois arrived in a minibus, together with two nuns from the local parish. The nuns loaded the girls into the transport to take them back to the residence attached to the church.

Emily took the priest's bank details and assured him that she would transfer a serious amount of money into his account. More than enough to purchase new clothes, feed them and repatriate those who needed help getting home. She would also transfer a lump sum large enough to ensure the girls would all get a good start in their future life.

The father had hesitated at such a gesture, but Emily assured him that money was no object.

After the prisoners had been taken care of, Tag and Muller searched the building for more information and then put it to flame.

The hunters watched it burn to the ground.

Then they went back to the farmhouse to discuss their next steps.

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The kitchen table was covered in various printed pages, a couple of old-fashioned ledgers and a laptop.

All stuff the hunters had removed from the mansion before torching the place.

'I have information on two more nests,' stated Emily. 'Both in France. One near Lyon, the other closer to Paris. Large. Maybe thirty strong. We'll need to clear those out as soon as we can. Looks like the French *Nosferatu* is stepping up their game. Strange, they've been fairly quiet of late.'

'Agreed,' said Muller.

Tag picked up one of the ledgers. 'What's that weird writing?' he asked.

'Cyrillic,' answered Muller. 'Russian.'

‘That’s what that accent was,’ noted Tag. ‘I thought maybe Slovakian, or Portuguese, or Polish.’

‘Those three accents don’t sound at all the same,’ said Muller.

Tag shrugged. ‘Whatever. Foreign.’

‘You’re foreign,’ pointed out Muller.

‘No, I’m not,’ denied Tag. ‘I’m English Jamaican.’

‘That’s foreign to me,’ quipped the Knight.

‘Whatever. That speccy guy with the accent, he was the accountant,’ said Tag. ‘I think. Looked like an accountant.’

‘Judging from this material, I agree. But that begs the question, what is a French ancient doing with a Russian accountant?’ mused Muller.

‘Outsourcing?’ ventured Troy.

Muller shook his head. ‘The Italian and British *Nosferatu* were very unusual in that they cooperated so closely. Normally, vampires are incredibly territorial. And none more so that the French and the Russians. To the point where I have never heard of a French vampire having a Russian familiar, or vice versa.’

‘Times change,’ said Emily.

‘Not unless there is a reason,’ countered Muller. ‘It would be like Republicans and Democrats teaming up together.’

‘That’s happened before,’ argued Emily. ‘During the Second World War. The two parties decided to work together for the sake of winning the war.’

‘Exactly,’ said Muller. ‘I fear a war may be coming. And if the vampires have decided to put aside their differences in order to take on humankind, may our Lord help us.’

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CHAPTER 15

He had once befriended count Vlad the Impaler and Genghis Kahn. But they were mere children compared to his vast age.

The centuries had blended into millennia, and the millennia became an unending blur of mankind's repeated blunders. War after war, ignominy heaped on top of ignobility. Famine, mass starvation and disease, most of it brought about via political ineptness or simple greed.

Man's inhumanity to man.

And they dared to call him a monster.

But he was old. Perhaps the oldest being on the planet.

In fact, such was his age he had advanced to the stage where he had become almost ethereal. His physical being superfluous, close to non-existent. A ghostly apparition held together solely by his enormous powers built up over thousands of years.

And he had been the unchallenged *Tzar* of the entire Russian House of the *Nosferatu* for many hundreds of years.

The Ancient one had ruled from his *Dvorest*, or Palace surrounded by over three hundred vampires, grinders and familiars. The magnificent dwelling situated on the shores of the Pripyat River.

Some twelve miles from Chernobyl.

His people knew him as the *Krov Tsar*. The Blood King, Aquilla Belikov. But he vaguely remembered a time before. When his name had been different. Aagha Erdogan. And before that, Angelo Alexopolous.

And even further back … Gar. Just, Gar. He thought it may have meant Lion. Or leopard. But that was so long ago.

Before iron.

Before the wheel.

Before…

But after shoddy Soviet construction and communist disregard for safety procedures had caused the Chernobyl Nuclear Plant to melt down, and cover the entire area with approximately *four hundred* times more toxic radiation than was dropped on Hiroshima, things had changed.

Obviously, all of the familiars died. Some fast, most slowly. In great pain.

But the brethren could not die. Although, over the next few years, many of them wished they had.

Because while the radiation could not kill them, it did change them. For most of the survivors it took almost three years before they fully adapted to the massive quantities of radiation poisoning.

By then *the change* had taken place.

Out of a clutch of one hundred and twenty Grinders, fifty Aspirants, twenty-six Masters and three Ancients – not including Belikov - only forty-one remained.

All the Grinders, and most of the Aspirants had met with the true death. Even their supernatural abilities to heal were not sufficient to fight off the radiation.

The survivors were no longer the suave, sophisticated creatures of physical beauty they had once been.

No.

The survivors were all now truly monsters, both in their inner selves and in the way they looked.

Hideously deformed with humped backs, extra-long canines, misshapen, lumpy features and gigantic slabs of muscle that would have looked out of place on the Hulk.

As well as the physical changes, their healing rates, strength and speed had more than doubled.

As had their need and desire for human blood.

However, unlike before, these new Uber-vampires could no longer blend in with society. Not for them picking hapless victims from a nightclub or off the street. They were simply too hideous to be seen without creating mass panic.

They either hunted under the cover of darkness, or they used familiars to collect their food for them.

And now, over thirty years after the Chernobyl meltdown, *Krov Tzar* Aquilla Belikov, Blood King, ancient and leader of the Russian *Nosferatu* was more powerful than he had ever been. With over a hundred familiars at the palace and more than two hundred working for him in various positions around the former Soviet Union, plus over a hundred recently turned Aspirants, he was ready to take the next step in what he saw as the Uber-vampire's evolution.

Two of the guards opened the doors to the throne room and bowed as his oldest friend and head of his enforcement branch walked in. Jebe Zurgadai.

Belikov had met him in 1206, when Jebe was one of Genghis Kahn's most trusted generals. After Genghis died, during a campaign in China, Belikov had turned Jebe, and together they had traveled across China to eastern Europe, to Kiev and then on to Hungary, where he befriended King Emeric.

However, after King Emeric died and his four-year-old son was crowned king, Belikov decided to move on.

And now, many centuries later, Jebe was still his most trusted advisor, instead of the Khan's.

'Some of the smaller houses are still resisting our advances, my *Tzar*,' informed Jebe after greeting his friend and master.

'Name them.'

'The Saratov's, the Volodga's and the Moldovan's.'

'Of course, the Moldovans,' sighed Belikov. 'Why does Count Lingu always have to be so contrary? Obviously, we need to bring them to heel. Our plans cannot proceed until all of the Russian houses are united. Under my banner, of course.'

'I think we should make an example of the Moldovans,' suggested Jebe.

'Lingu is a popular master,' stated Belikov. 'And he holds much sway with the other masters.'

'All the more reason we should attack him without mercy. We need to show anyone who sits on the fence that we will simply smash the fence out from underneath them. The time for negotiation has passed. Now is the time for blood and steel.

'And after we have united the Russian *Nosferatu*, we can begin the search for the *Triginta Argenteous*.'

The Blood King smiled, an expression of such horror and evil that even Jebe almost flinched.

'Yes,' breathed the king. 'The *Triginta.* The unholy artifact that will give me power over all of the *Nosferatu*.

'And then I shall become Blood King of the known world. *Krov Tzar* Aquilla Belikov. Emperor.'

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CHAPTER 16

Belikov had tasked Jebe with the attack on the Moldovan house run by Count Lingu.

The Moldovan headquarters was situated in a twentieth century Soviet era apartment block next to a small ornamental lake in a town called Soracha. The exterior of the concrete building was a combination of austerity and solidity.

Around the building, a collection of residential bungalows, a market square and a town hall.

The entire town was controlled by the family, and everyone in it worked for them in some way. They were considered a small House, but a powerful one.

As discussed, Jebe was going in heavy handed.

Forty familiars, fifty Aspirants and ten masters.

The familiars were primarily to handle the artillery. Four 2B11 120 mm mortars, each with a crew of five, plus drivers and assistants. The familiars set the mortars up just over a third of a mile from the Moldovan HQ, stacking hundreds of rounds of HE and incendiary rounds ready to fire.

The vampires were ensconced in luxury people carriers. Darkened windows, aircon, satellite comms, and full entertainment systems.

Jebe had instructed the mortar crews to begin their bombardment six minutes before sundown. A trained 120mm mortar crew can maintain an extended rate of fire of ten rounds a minute. Six minutes gave them enough time to launch approximately three hundred rounds. Enough to flatten most of the small town of Soracha.

Then, as the sun went below the horizon, the vampires would attack, finding and exterminating any survivors. Even with advanced healing capabilities, it is extremely difficult to survive a direct, or even indirect hit from a round containing thirty pounds of high explosive.

Regardless of this, there would be survivors. There are always survivors after any bombardment, no matter how fierce, and *Tzar* Belikov's brethren were there to tear those survivors to shreds.

This was not meant to be war – it was a mass extermination.

The clocks counted down. And approximately six minutes before sunset, fire rained down from the skies. Hundreds of pounds of explosive followed by hundreds of incendiaries pummeled the town and then put it to flame.

Vampires huddled under whatever cover they could find, unable to venture out into the fast-waning sunlight, while human familiars and servants ran screaming in an attempt to escape the carnage.

At the six-minute mark the mortars stuttered to a halt as the sun retired.

Belikov's vampires descended.

Then the real butchery began.

The house of Moldovia fought back as well as they could. But after such a pounding, few were able to react as fast and as well as they normally could. And Jebe had insured he had brought only the most savage of his brood.

By midnight only the Blood King's brethren walked Moldovan soil.

The point had been made.

Resist the Blood King at your peril.

There could be only one master of the Russian *Nosferatu*.

Krov Tzar Aquilla Belikov.

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CHAPTER 17

Muller used his contacts and Emily's access to funds to organize the team's transport.

A customized, six berth Globetrotter Motorhome. The major differences between the normal Globetrotter and Muller's one was the light armor plating and run-flat tires. Plus, the fact that two of the berths had been converted into an armory. The standard engine had also been replaced with a BMW five-liter V8, effectively doubling the horse power and adding fifty percent to the top speed. To ensure stability, the suspension had been both lowered and strengthened.

The plan was to proceed first to the nest in Lyon and then, after they had cleared that out, on to Corbavel near Paris.

Muller took the wheel while Troy and Emily sat in passenger section. Tag was busy inspecting the contents of the armory.

'Hey,' he shouted to Muller. 'Were did all this stuff come from?'

'Local representative of the Vatican. Why do you ask?'

'Man, there's enough firepower in here to start World War Three. Machine guns, 51mm light mortar, some sort of grenade launcher, pistols, hand grenades, loads of silver coated ammo, selection of rifles, sub machine guns, silvered knives. Oh, look, more Holy Water. Wait – shut the front door. Oh yes, baby come to Tag.'

'What?' asked Emily.

'Daddy got himself a replacement for Missus Jones,' answered the big man.

Emily rolled her eyes. Tag was referring to the Minigun he used to carry before he had gone touring with Muller. Em had no idea what had happened to the original Missus Jones but she was glad Tag had a replacement. Simple pleasures for a simple man.

She looked over and watched the big man stroke the M134 Minigun like it was a pet dog.

'What you going to call it?'

'She,' answered Tag. 'Not it. Anyway, her name is Missus Jones. They all called Missus Jones.'

The big man started to sing.

Me and Mrs. Jones
We got a thing, goin' on
We both know that it's wrong
But it's much too strong

To let it go now.

Troy chuckled. ‘One of life’s classic love affairs,’ he quipped.

‘It’s a five-hour trip,’ informed Muller. ‘Estimated time of arrival, around three o’clock this afternoon.’

‘Unless we stop for a nice lunch,’ interjected Tag.

‘Unless we stop to eat,’ admitted the Knight. ‘I’ve booked us into a bed and breakfast establishment close to our target. It’s run by a trusted member of the church. I suggest we get there, and then get some transport more suited to scout out the vamps. A small saloon of some sort.’

There was a general mumble of agreement. Muller put the vehicle in gear and pulled off.

The next chapter of Emily’s life had started.

She was back in the game.

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CHAPTER 18

Madame Dupont smiled broadly as she served the table a third helping of *cassoulet*. Never before had she met people with such healthy appetites. And such a love for her food. She had been warned to cook enough for a football team, and she had. Because when the church advised, you obeyed.

And when she saw only four people exit the vehicle her heart dropped. Because a French person abhors the waste of good food even more than they despise war.

But there would be no wastage. They ate like trenchermen. Especially the skinny blonde girl.

Madame affectionally pat the girl on the shoulder as she crossed the kitchen to put the huge casserole dish back on the stove. Little blondes who ate like trenchermen were high on the nations like-list.

And as for the men – *ooh la la!* Such men. Every one of them tall, handsome and built like stone outbuildings.

They all projected an animal sex appeal like a lighthouse shining its light across the ocean.

Beware, ships run aground here. And women. And even men.

She brushed a lock of gray hair out of her eyes. If only she were twenty years younger.

Of course, that would make her sixty. Well, okay, sixty-three, but who was counting?

'Hey, mama. *Excusez-moi, s'il vous plait*. Could I get some more bread? Another one of those long, skinny loaves.'

Madame grabbed a couple of *baguettes* from her bread bin and brought them over to Tag, handing them to him with a broad smile.

Tag winked at her as she walked off.

Madame Dupont blushed with pleasure. Yes, she still had it. *La!* Such men.

After they finished eating, the team gathered in the sitting room. Madame supplied cognac and cigars and then left them to their privacy.

'Good food,' noted Troy as he rolled his cigar around, ensuring it was perfectly lit.

Muller poured cognacs for all and then they sat. 'So,' he started. 'We're agreed, we attack at sunrise.'

Emily nodded. 'From this afternoons recce, it's obvious there is good security and a lot of guards. At least the vamps will be off their game

during the sunlight hours. That should give us some sort of advantage.'

'Don't need any advantage,' interjected Tag. 'We got Missus Jones.' He turned to Troy. 'Go high.'

The two men high-fived.

'Yes,' they shouted in unison.

Emily smiled. 'Children. Okay, gentlemen, as soon as you've all finished your cigars, let's get our heads down. Make sure we're ready for tomorrow.'

They muttered their agreement.

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CHAPTER 19

When people envisage France, they tend to think of the Eiffel Tower, Paris, vineyards and Michelin stars. But normally, not medieval castles. That remains the domain of England, Scotland and Wales.

However, there are approximately forty-five thousand castles, or *Chateau* in France. Many of them still habitable. And many of them of vast size.

In fact, the team of hunters were looking at one right now. Unlike the classic British castle, this was basically a fortified mansion. With pointed spires and scores of fluttering flags, the structure was more Disney than Braveheart. But it was still a substantial edifice with high walls and serious security measures.

'That section of wall,' said Emily. 'It's a blind spot. The trees, no windows facing that way. That's our point of ingress.'

'True,' agreed Muller. 'But how do we get over? It's got to be twenty feet high.'

'Troy and I will scale it,' answered Emily. 'Then we'll drop a rope down and pull you and Tag up. Do the same thing to let you down the other side.'

'Works for me,' said Tag. 'You okay with my weight plus Missus Jones. With extra ammo, the battery pack and my usual kit, it's an extra three hundred pounds. Add that to my weight, you looking at over six hundred pounds. That's over a quarter of a ton.'

Emily raised an eyebrow but didn't deign to answer what she considered to be a superfluous question.

'Come on,' she said. 'Let's get into position.'

The team thread their way through the surrounding vineyard, keeping to the long shadows cast by the rising sun, using their skills to remain unseen. They approached the wall with caution and, as they got there, Troy stripped down and changed into his wolfman form. Emily folded his clothes and stored them in one of the packs on her webbing.

Then she scaled the wall. There was no hesitation or seeking handholds. She simply crawled up the sheer face, digging her extended talons into the stone itself when she needed to. Troy followed, using his paws and supernatural strength to do the same thing.

As soon as Emily got to the top of the wall, she dropped the rope

down, moving as fast as she could. Troy leaped from the top, into the grounds, and hid in the shadows at the base of the twenty-foot-high wall, keeping a lookout for any guards.

Muller tied the end of the rope around his waist and gave Emily a thumbs up. She pulled the knight up with ease, hauling him to the top of the wall and then easing him over and down into the Chateau grounds.

Then she dropped the rope for Tag. The big man connected himself up and Emily hauled. Getting the big man up and over was more of a challenge but the Daywalker still accomplished it with relative ease, dropping into the grounds herself as soon as Tag touched down.

They moved again, using the ornate shrubs, trees and verdant flower beds to remain concealed.

Emily was impressed at how much Tag had improved his skills since she had last seen him. He had always been game, but now she could see he had a gloss of professionalism he didn't have before. The year spent with a Knight of the Holy See had definitely upped his game. Despite the fact he was carrying almost three hundred pounds of ordnance he moved with a measured grace and stealth, as opposed to his usual Buffalo-ploughing-through-beach-sand mode of locomotion.

Muller showed his usual consummate professionalism as he covered ground.

As for the wolfman and the Daywalker – their ability to stalk was unprecedented. Even in the full morning sun they were almost impossible to spot.

The team were aiming for a side entrance. A door that seemed to be little used. Their objective, to get inside without alerting the sentries.

As they approached the door, Troy held his hand up, signaling them to stop.

A pair of huge Rottweilers came sprinting around the corner, lips pulled back exposing their canines, supremely confident in their ability to take on any comers.

They took one look at the wolfman and fell on their backs, exposing the bellies in a sign of complete and utter submission.

The team ignored them as they gathered outside the door.

Emily checked if it was locked, and when she found it was, she used her standard method of gaining access. Simply turning the handle until her strength defeated the mechanics of the lock.

Pushing the door open, she ghosted in, followed by the other hunters. They appeared to be in some sort boot-room. Perhaps a service entrance for staff during the rainy season. There were racks for wellington boots, scrapers to get mud off footwear and a wet area to wash off any dirt before it was tracked into the chateau.

Tag frowned.

‘What’s the problem, big guy?’ asked Emily.

‘A room for footwear,’ he replied. ‘It’s obscene. When I was a kiddie, my whole family lived in a place the size of this room. Man, the rich are different.’

‘I’m rich,’ noted Emily.

Tag shook his head. ‘No. You just got money. There’s a difference.’

Emily grinned. The big man’s simplistic views on life were refreshing. ‘What say we go and kill a few of these rich folk,’ she suggested.

Tag patted Missus Jones. ‘We ready,’ he affirmed.

Emily led the way.

They entered a long, dimly lit corridor. The walls were painted an institutional green. Gloss paint. The floors covered in 1970’s linoleum. For some reason, the place smelled of boiled cabbage.

They were obviously in the servant’s section of the chateau.

‘Keep going,’ advised Muller. ‘Most likely, the kitchen and the servant’s quarters will be close. I doubt we will run into any vampires in this part of the house. Maybe Grinders, although they are usually locked up, so most likely just familiars.’

‘Whoever we come across, take them down quietly,’ stressed Emily.

They all nodded, and Muller drew a pair of throwing knives from his webbing.

One of the doors on the side of the corridor opened. Troy reacted instantly, grabbing the person and smashing their head against the wall. They dropped soundlessly to the floor; their body utterly limp. Devoid of life.

Muller looked down at the body. A middle-aged woman. Dressed in a maid’s outfit. His expression was disapproving, but he said nothing.

Emily took note and put her hand on the Knight’s shoulder. ‘Familiars are the enemy,’ she said. ‘This is total war.’

Muller nodded. ‘I know,’ he said sadly. ‘And I will not hesitate to do the same. I merely wish I did not have to do so.’

They proceeded down the corridor, opening all of the doors as they did. Checking. Most of the rooms were bedrooms, except for a large janitor’s closet, full of cleaning utensils, clothes and chemicals.

Three of the bedrooms were occupied, the servants having returned from what was obviously the night shift. After all, vampires tended to be more active at night.

Troy dispatched two of them and Muller killed the last one, a young man who reacted faster than the others, drawing a pistol as they entered the room. But before he could get a shot off, one of Muller’s throwing knives sprouted from his throat, severing his jugular and halting his ability to shout a warning.

The Knight retrieved his blade, cleaned it on the fallen man’s shirt

and kept it ready for the next encounter.

At the end of the corridor, the last door did indeed lead to the kitchen. The team entered to discover ten people seated around a table, eating, plus a cook and two assistants standing at the stove.

A collection of servants returning from their night shift, and others breaking their fast before beginning a day's work.

Troy blurred into motion, attacking the cook and the assistants.

Muller's blades flashed through the air as he targeted the people at the far end of the table and Emily called forth Deathwalker.

It was a simple massacre. Most of the seated servants never even managed to stand before they were savagely chopped down.

Troy destroyed the cook and assistants, and Tag scragged the only man who did manage to get out of his seat, breaking his neck with a swift wrench.

Afterwards, the team avoided each other's eyes. They knew the fallen were all in league with evil. They knew that a familiar is merely the left hand of a vampire. And they knew that all familiars had to be destroyed.

But such wanton savagery did not sit well with any of them.

Except, perhaps, Emily. But that was not her true nature, it was merely her dark side striving for ascendance.

'Come on,' growled Troy. 'Upwards and onwards. We have a job to do. Let's so it.'

Once again, Emily led the way.

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CHAPTER 20

‘This place is a maze,’ said Tag. ‘You sure we going the right way?’

‘This nose never lies,’ growled Troy as he stalked down another seemingly endless corridor.

They were searching for the wing that housed the aspirants. If the house adhered to the customary *Nosferatu* norms, the Aspirant’s rooms would be situated together, as they would still be spending time asleep during the day. As well as the fact that vampires were extremely conscious of one’s levels and standings. Masters did not mix with Aspirants, although they did mix with Adepts on occasion.

Grinders would be kept somewhere else, as they were classed as little more than animals.

The team moved with great stealth, knowing that, although the Aspirants were most likely abed, the Adepts and Masters would be up, as they were at the level where they no longer really needed any sleep. And they could come across them at any moment.

Whenever they passed a window, Muller would tear down the rubber backed drapes, letting the sun flood in. Turning the room into a vampire death trap.

He called it, combat decorating.

They came across a single familiar as they entered yet another dark corridor. The man was busy sweeping the carpets. Troy, who was still leading the way, dispatched him with a single punch that smashed him into the wall, crushing his skull and breaking his back as he did.

Then the wolfman stopped, sniffed the air and nodded.

‘This is the corridor,’ he announced. ‘These doors.’

‘Remember,’ added Emily. ‘We’re still quiet. No guns if we can help it. Let’s go two to a room. Troy and I. Tag and Muller. Take the occupant out, move on. We’ll take the right side of the corridor; you guys take the left.’

‘And don’t forget to rip the drapes down to let the sun in,’ said Muller. ‘Give the vamps less places to hide if things go wrong. Oh, and Tag, no human battering ram, if the doors are locked, open them like Emily. Quietly.’

Tag frowned. ‘No guns, no battering ram. You taking away Tag’s best tools, man. Stripping the fun outa the whole game.’

The two teams took a door each, counted down and entered at the same time.

They worked fast and efficiently. This wasn’t a duel; this was pest

control. As Emily and Troy entered their first room, Emily brought forth Deathwalker and decapitated the sleeping bloodsucker without hesitation or preamble. Troy pulled the drapes down and they moved on to the next room.

On the opposite side of the corridor, Muller's sword swung and Tag's massive Bowie knife stabbed as they exterminated the evil ones with cold efficiency.

Together, they managed to exterminate twelve Aspirants before Tag opened a door to discover one of the vampires awake. The bloodsucker reacted with their usual speed, blurring across the room to latch onto Tag's neck. With a savage yank, he ripped the big man's jugular open and then he leaped back, readying himself to take on Muller.

The Knight held his sword towards the vamp, weaving the point from side to side, covering himself. Then, as the creature was about to spring, Tag stood up, his neck healed.

The vamp hesitated for a split second as he stared at the big man.

'But, how?' it stammered.

Instead of answering, Tag used an overarm strike to slam his Bowie into the top of the vamp's head, striking so hard the blade buried itself to the hilt. Then he jerked the twelve-inch blade savagely back and forth until the vamp's brains were thoroughly scrambled.

Finally, he ripped it out and kicked the body towards Muller who decapitated it with a casual backhand of his sword.

Fortunately, that was the only vamp awake and the rest were dispatched without further ado.

'Nice work, guys,' said Emily. 'Upwards and onwards, let's move, places to go, vampires to kill.'

The team followed her through a set of double doors at the end of the corridor, and then Troy took point, leading with his nose once again.

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CHAPTER 21

There were seven houses present, gathered together in the vast ballroom of the Blood King's palace.

But even that huge space was not large enough to hold every member of every house present. So Jebe had limited the ballroom to Ancients, Masters and Adepts.

The Aspirants were delegated to a separate adjacent room.

There were over a hundred in the ballroom. Then the Aspirants bumped the figure up by another two hundred.

Over three hundred immortal creatures of power.

The world had not seen such a gathering since the time of King Arthur, when he fought the great war against the combined houses of the United Kingdom and Italy. It truly was an awe-inspiring sight.

And all waited for the appearance of the new self-proclaimed leader of all of the *Nosferatu* houses of Russia.

The *Krov Tsar*. Blood King, Aquilla Belikov.

The atmosphere was tense. It was obvious that some of the houses were here under pressure. Or because they had seen what happened to the house of Moldovia. But there was one thing all of the masters of the various houses agreed on. Belikov and his monstrously deformed and enhanced brood were creatures worthy of, if not respect, then fear.

It takes a lot to instill fear in a Master Vampire, but the Blood King had done it.

A frisson of excitement rippled through the gathering as the doors opened and Belikov strode in, surrounded by his honor guard. Ten humped backed, massively over-muscled monster vampires surrounding a warped and hideously deformed master.

'Kneel before your king,' demanded Jebe as he cast his gaze over the congregation.

With various degrees of hesitation, the gathering fell to their knees, heads bowed in a sign of respectful fear.

Except for the head of house Kiev. An ancient who was most likely the only vampire present who may have approached Belikov's vast age.

The Blood King stopped and stared at the ancient. 'Count Goncherov,' he greeted the ancient. 'You deem yourself too worthy to kneel before your betters?'

'You are not my better,' answered Goncherov. 'This assumption of

leadership is not the *Nosferatu* way,' he continued. 'Our strength lies in our diversity. The fact that each house exists separately. Controlling its own businesses, hunting for its own food, disciplining its own members. Separate development together.'

Jebe started to move towards the Count, but Belikov stopped him with a gesture. Instead, he himself stepped out of his circle of guards and walked across to the recalcitrant Ancient.

The Blood King stood in front of Goncherov and smiled. A grotesque expression that was at odds with his lumpen, deformed features,

'How long have we known each other?' Belikov asked.

'I'm not sure,' answered the Count. 'Six, maybe seven hundred years.'

'And are we friends?'

Goncherov thought before he answered, and then he nodded. 'Yes. I think so.'

Belikov's dreadful smiled widened, exposing rows of shark-like teeth while a forked purple tongue lashed across his swollen, livery lips. 'Oh, my good Count,' he continued. 'You are incorrect. You are no friend of the Blood King. You are nothing. Not even an inconvenience. Barely worth a thought. And you dare to challenge me?'

Goncherov saw the rest of the brethren around him stepping back. They were not even being subtle about it. Distancing themselves from the dead-vamp-walking. And he realized he had made a grievous error.

But it was too late.

Belikov's maw opened impossibly wide, unhinging like a snake, and he struck, latching onto Goncherov's face and shaking him, tearing into his flesh and shattering his bones. Then, with a final savage twist, he tore the whole front of the Count's face off and spat it onto the floor.

He stepped back; his visage once again split by the insane grin, blood dripping off his chin.

'Finish him,' he commanded of his honor guard.

The members of the guard fell on Goncherov like a pack of ravening hounds, tearing him limb from limb, slicing and dicing his flesh and pulping his bones. Finally, when what remained of the Count was recognizable only as something that was once flesh, the Blood King ordered them to stop.

His gaze swept the room. 'Anyone else with a comment?'

The silence was deafening.

'Fine, now, let me tell you what we are going to do. From this moment on, every member of every house under my rule will obey without question. Do you understand?'

There was a muted chorus of agreement.

‘Do you understand?’ repeated the Tsar.

This time, the reply was much louder. Some even stamped their feet in approval, or clapped loudly in support.

‘Better,’ said the King. ‘This, my beloved brethren, is just the beginning. Look around you and mark who stands by your side. Because in the centuries to come you will be able to tell your sires, I was there. At the very start, when the Blood King set the *Nosferatu* on their ordained path.

‘When King Belikov set *the prophecy* in motion.

‘I was there when he declared that the *Nosferatu* would rule the world.’

There was a stunned silence – then in singles, and finally as a group, they began to cheer.

Krov Tsar.

Krov Tsar!

KROV TSAR!

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CHAPTER 22

Marie Petit had survived the French revolution. Her family, however, had all ended up with their heads in a basket at the end of the guillotine.

The same night her family all perished, she gained eternal life. Or at least, eternal un-death. Her master and sire was a French revolutionary by the name of Jacques Cordelia, a close friend of both Robespierre and Georges Danton, the leaders of the revolution.

Unbeknown to most, Cordelia was the actual driving force behind the revolution. The leaders thought that he only met at night or in cellars due to his need for secrecy, never once suspecting he was an ancient vampire.

And the fact that the revolution resulted in the deaths of over forty thousand people and caused the streets of France to run red with blood, amused the Master vampire no end.

Even his turning of Marie instead of sending her to the guillotine was purely due to his twisted sense of humor. He looked to create chaos and reveled in the resulting anarchy.

Cordelia was dispatched soon after the revolution, by a Polish nobleman and hunter known only as, Von Helwing. The noble later acquired a certain amount of fame when he was cast as a vampire hunter in Bram Stoker's Dracula, wherein Stoker mistakenly called him, Van Helsing.

And now, Marie Petit was the leader of her own small house. She had re-purchased her family chateau and treated her servants and subjects just as she had before the revolution.

Vive la révolution

Let them eat cake.

Or blood, as the case may be.

Marie was the Master. There were no mistresses in the *Nosferatu*. Misogyny and chauvinism did not exist. Personal power was all that mattered. And Marie was exceptionally powerful.

At the moment, she sat at the head of a large dining table. It was one of her notable foibles that she insisted on feeding at a table. Having the victims served up as if they were part of a banquet.

Twenty vampires sat opposite her. Three Masters and seventeen Adepts. There were a further nineteen Aspirants in her house, but all of them were recently turned and spent most of the daylight hours sleeping, or at least resting.

The brethren were waiting for the familiars to bring their food.

Tonight's repast consisted of a clutch of teenagers Marie's household manager had purchased from a new supplier. Although Marie encouraged hunting for food, she insisted that the members of her house did not overhunt the local area. They were allowed the odd home grown treat, but on the whole they were instructed to travel at least six hours from the chateau to hunt. As a result, she often ordered food in.

She had a system of traffickers who supplied fresh young humans from places as far afield as Vietnam and Africa. After all, variety is the spice of life.

Lately, a large percentage of her supplies were being provided by a new player on the market. A Russian named Pytor Smirnov. Dealer in humanity.

And talking about food, it wouldn't do to show, but Marie was less than impressed with the service her familiars were delivering this morning. When she sat down at the head of the table, it was customary for the food to arrive *poste haste*.

She would be sure to discipline the serving staff and the wranglers for this oversight, although, in front of her brethren, she would not let her ire show. To show emotion showed weakness. And the weak did not last long as the head of a house.

Regardless, though, this sort of service was unacceptable. She was about to command one of her subjects to go see where the servants were, when she noticed the door opening.

'About time,' she murmured to herself.

And then the world around her turned to fire.

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CHAPTER 23

Troy stood outside the door and nodded. ‘They’re in here,’ he whispered. ‘At least twenty of them. They smell like they’re all high level. Masters and Adepts.’

Emily turned to Tag. ‘What say we open the door and then you and Missus Jones introduce yourselves?’

Tag grinned. ‘We all ready. It’s date night for me and Missus Jones.’

‘Wait,’ interjected Muller as he took a brace of grenades from his webbing. ‘These grenades have silver shot in them. Why don’t I throw these in first, as they explode, Tag does his thing?’

Emily gave the Knight a thumb up. ‘Go for it. I’ll open the door, you guys go for it, and as soon as Missus Jones stops talking, we go in hard.’

Emily opened the door, Muller chucked the grenades in. Two seconds later they exploded and the big man entered the room.

The General Electric M134 Minigun fires a 7.62 round at a rate of approximately 6000 per minute. This works out to 100 rounds a second.

Tag was carrying 1000 rounds of ammunition. He expended the entire stock in just over ten seconds.

But the vampire is an incredibly hardy creature, and although the grenades and the gatling gun had torn many of them to shreds, there were still a few in combat condition.

But not for long.

Troy and Emily bound into the room, axe swinging, claws tearing and teeth crunching.

Muller followed, his silver throwing knives blurring across the room as he threw them at the remaining vamps.

Tag dropped Missus Jones and drew his twin Desert Eagles, adding his .50 cal rounds to the general pandemonium.

The room descended into utter chaos as blades and fire filled the air.

Twenty seconds later, the only vampire left standing was Marie, master of house Petit. Almost unbelievably, she had managed to remain unscathed through the entire massacre.

She stared at the hunters with raw, undisguised hatred. Then she threw herself at them

Emily called up Deathwalker and stepped forward, blocking her attack.

The rest of the hunters stepped back as the two women went at each other. The Master vampire and the Daywalker.

It was almost impossible to follow the combat, such was the speed at which it was being fought. Bodies blurred back and forth across the room, disintegrating furniture, smashing into walls and throwing kicks and punches at literal sound-breaking speed.

After twenty seconds it started to slow down as each took measure of one another, and the fight became less a display of speed and strength and more a test of skill.

The two circled each other, lashing out every few seconds, parrying, kicking and moving.

But after another half a minute it became blatantly apparent that Emily was merely playing with the Master.

Marie stopped moving, dropped her guard and shook her head. 'You treat me with so little respect,' she said. 'Am I not even worth your full effort? You will not do me the small honor of fighting me as an equal? Rather, you play with me like a cat with a bird. Why? Do you seek to humiliate me?'

Emily scoffed at the bloodsucker. 'You aren't worthy of respect,' she said. 'You're simply an evil leach. Lower than the lowest insect. And I play with you like a cat with a *rat*, not a bird.'

Marie shrieked in anger and launched herself at the Daywalker.

Emily met her charge with a spinning back roundhouse kick that landed with such ferocity it propelled the vampire across the room and smashed her into the opposite wall with enough force to shatter every bone in her body.

Emily sneered in absolute disgust. 'Muller,' she said. 'Finish it.'

The Knight of the Holy See walked up to the prostrate Master vampire and drew a flask of Holy Water from his webbing.

'The power of Christ compels me.'

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CHAPTER 24

Father Monet was there at Muller's request. He was a short, rotund man who wore a threadbare, faded cassock that was once black and was now a dirty brown. It was also at least two sizes too small for him and stretched uncomfortably across his ample belly.

He stood next to Tag, his diminutive stature making him look a bit like a volleyball next to an oak. Together they watched the chateau burn.

Earlier, after the team had dispatched Marie, they had proceeded to the basement where the Grinders were held. A few grenades and a couple of homemade Molotov cocktails later and the Grinders were no more.

A quick search later, and they had led the human prisoners from the building.

After Emily questioned had them, and she gotten a name.

A Russian. Pytor Smirnov.

She also got an address to one of his warehouses near the city of Nice.

There were twenty-two souls. Again, mostly young, late teens to early twenties. Various nationalities.

As before, Muller had used his contacts in the church to provide succor and shelter for the victims. And once again, Emily made funds available to ensure their transition back into society was made as easy as possible.

'They scare me,' said father Monet softly, as the flames consumed the mansion.

'Who? Vampires?' asked Tag

The priest shook his head. 'Them,' he pointed at Muller. 'The Knights of the Holy See. Particularly that one. Muller the Pious.'

Tag chuckled. 'Why?'

'His holiness shames me. The rock upon which his faith is built. He suffers not from vacillation or hesitance. He is resolute. Strong. The strength of his belief belittles my weak attempts.'

Tag shook his head. 'Oh, church-man, you got it all wrong. Trust me. It's easy to have faith when you do what we do. When you bang up against proper evil day in and day out, it's easy to maintain your faith.

'But what *you* do, dealing with reality. Helping people with their proper lives, their daily worries. That takes serious faith.

‘What I’m saying is, it’s easy to know the devil exists when you see him every day. But if you’ve never seen him, then it’s a lot harder. It takes faith like yours to keep fighting the good fight. What we do, what Muller does, it’s simple. Black and white. We don’t have to sift between the grays. We see, we kill. You see, you help. You save,

‘Father, take it from me – you da man.’

Father Monet didn’t reply. But when Tag looked at him, he noticed the man’s eyes glistened with unshed tears.

‘Thank you, my son,’ he said, eventually.

‘No worries, church-man,’ replied the Jamaican. ‘You keep doing what you doing. Now, we gotta go, you okay with this?’

Monet nodded.

Tag followed the rest of the team to their transport. It was time to plan their next step.

It was time to visit Pytor Smirnov, put a stop to his business and find out what yet another Russian was doing involved with the French *Nosferatu*.

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CHAPTER 25

‘I’m sure we could force at least some of the smaller European houses to gather under our banner,’ said Jebe. ‘After all, we have been seeding our people amongst them for a while now. Accountants, familiars. I have even commanded Pytor to begin supplying food to some of the French and German houses.’

‘Yes, you have done well, my friend,’ said Belikov. ‘But such is the nature of the true *Nosferatu* that they will never bend a knee to a foreign house. They barely cooperate amongst themselves. And for my plan of total domination to come to fruition, I must demand more than mere allegiance. I must have total subservience. I need them to submit utterly.’

‘But still…’ started Jebe.

‘No. There is no but. We both know the only way to make this work is to find the *Triginta Argenteous*. The artifact that all *Nosferatu* must bow before. Once I have that in my hands, I will have total control over all of the brethren.’

Jebe did not answer, but his expression of disbelief showed through his lumpen, deformed features.

Belikov laughed, an ugly grating sound. ‘I see you still harbor doubt,’ he said.

Jebe bowed his head, but he did not gainsay the Blood King.

‘Speak, Jebe,’ insisted Belikov. ‘We have been together for almost a thousand years. You have nothing to fear from me. What is the problem?’

‘I mean no disrespect, my *Tsar*,’ answered the ancient. ‘But the *Triginta?* Obviously, I have heard the stories, the power the artifact holds over all. The prophecy is known to all who are *Nosferatu*.

‘And lo, when the man of Kerioth be turned, his bane shall carry the authority of the disciples. And upon his true death will the Triginta Argenteous *hold that power in perpetuity until it be released by its holder.*

‘But is that not merely myth and legend?’

‘You have the prophecy down word for word,’ acknowledged Belikov. ‘But as you say, it is mere meaningless gobbledygook if you know not what it pertains to.’

‘Forgive me, *Krov Tsar*,’ said Jebe, head held low in respect. ‘My ignorance shames me. Enlighten me, my king.’

‘Do you at least know who the man of Kerioth is?’ asked Belikov.

Jebe shook his head.

‘I see. We have been together so long but there are still times when I forget you are a stripling compared to me. How old are you now?’

‘Eight hundred and seven years, my king.’

Belikov chuckled. ‘I remember when man was just beginning to forge iron. So many thousands of years ago the memories are now all but mists in my mind. However, be that as it may – Kerioth was the birth place of one, Judah Lebbaeus.’

Jebe looked blank.

‘You will likely know him by his other name. Judas Iscariot,’ prompted Belikov. ‘The great betrayer. What few know about Iscariot is that, contrary to popular belief, he did not hang himself. No, instead he was actually turned by an ancient Master called, Augustus Sextus. An ex-*Tribunus* in the Roman army.

‘Iscariot never joined a house, instead he roamed the earth as a lone vampire. Cursed and despised by all. Not only as the great betrayer, but also as *Nosferatu*. Eventually he was killed in a meaningless scuffle on the borders of Germania some five hundred years later.

‘The Visigoth king, Euric, who was still a mere chieftain at the time, was involved in the scuffle. After the fight, he looted Iscariot’s body.

‘And on it he found the thirty pieces of silver that Judas accepted from the Romans in return for betraying his Lord and friend.

‘After all those years, he never spent it, nor let it leave his side.

‘Euric had no idea what the silver was, but he was fascinated by the coinage, noting the date and seeing how old it was. As well as this, he sensed a great power emanating from the coins. An almost physical presence, as if they were speaking to him, cajoling him, promising him.

‘So, he kept the silver for himself, setting the coins in a necklace to wear at all times. It became a symbol of his office.

‘But what Euric did not know, is the coins were cursed, and blessed at the same time. They had been blessed with the power of the disciples, in as much they inspired great loyalty amongst any whom the wearer would have follow them. Fanatical loyalty. Devotion without question or choice. In other words, if the wearer demanded obsequiousness, the subject was unable to refuse. They would become veritable disciples of the wearer. Such was the power of the coins.

‘The problem was, at the same time, the silver was cursed. Because with the power of subservience came sure death. The wielder was cursed to die within years, if not months. The curse of the great betrayer.

‘Thus, it came to pass that Euric became King and went on to be the only man ever to unite the Visgoth hordes. He managed to crush the Romans, and continued his advance until he controlled most of Europe.

‘But then the curse struck, and after a mere twenty months, King Euric was struck down by a terrible wasting disease. He died in hideous agony. After that, the Visgoth Empire crumbled, never to rise again.

‘In the old tongue the word for thirty is *Triginta*,’ concluded Belikov. ‘And the word for silver is, *Argenteous*.’

‘The *Triginta Argenteous*,’ said Jebe, his voice almost throbbing with awe. ‘But tell me, my master,’ he continued. ‘If it comes with such a curse, what use is it to you?’

Belikov laughed. And for the first time in many decades Jebe saw true humor in his expression. ‘My good friend,’ he answered. ‘What is the threat of death to the Undead? No, I can wield the *Triginta* without fear.

‘To me it is the key to the kingdom of the world. The path to total control.

‘So, Jebe, my true and trusted advisor and companion, we need to bend all effort to tracking it down. Spare no expense, spare no time and accept no excuses. The *Triginta* must be mine.’

Jebe bowed deeply to his king and master, filled with the desire to serve.

And to become the right hand of the future leader of the known world.

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CHAPTER 26

Emily was surprised to discover she actually owned a villa in Nice, courtesy of Sylvian's estate.

Muller had been discussing finding a place for the team to stay when Emily had checked her laptop, as the name of the town rang a bell. And, sure enough, there it was. In the area of Old Nice, overlooking the sea.

There was also a contact name and cell number with the address. Emily phoned it and a woman answered. After Emily had informed her who she was, the woman, Sara LaBell, informed her that the villa would be ready for them when they arrived. That included food and servants.

They set off as the sun rose, aiming to get to Nice by late afternoon.

When they pulled up to the gates of the villa they were staggered at its splendor. The house was set in a manicured garden and surrounded by a white rendered wall. They entered through a set of gates that had obviously been opened ready for their arrival, and proceeded up the crushed marble driveway.

The two-story villa was yards from its own private beach with an unobstructed view of both the sea and the town.

The team exited the vehicle to be greeted by a tiny, sophisticated looking, middle-aged woman and two diminutive servants. The servants took their bags while the woman introduced herself.

'*Bonne après-midi*. I am Sara LaBell. I used to be the proxy for *Monsieu*r Baptiste in this area. Now I am yours,' she addressed Emily. 'The servants have prepared the villa; cook is preparing an early dinner and I am sure you will want to freshen up. I will show you to your rooms.'

They followed her into the villa.

The entrance hall was a study in wealth and good taste. Cool marble floors, walls and pillars. On the wall, a lost Monet. Waterlilies at dawn. Sweeping stairway up to the second floor.

They ascended the stairs and Sara showed each of them to their rooms.

Emily opened the door to her suite to be greeted by a veritable forest of fresh flowers, a fruit bowl and a selection of snacks laid out on a table. Somehow, even though the servants had been only seconds ahead of them, their clothes were already hanging in the closets.

Emily turned to thank Sara, but she was no longer there.

Troy grinned. ‘That girl is not human,’ he noted. ‘She smells wrong.’

‘Neither are the servants,’ added Emily. ‘No one puts clothes away that fast. Most likely they’re some sort of Fae. Brownies, maybe.’

‘I thought Brownies were wizened and hairy,’ said Troy.

Emily shook her head. ‘No, you get all shapes and sizes. Merlin told me about them.’ As she talked, she walked across the room and opened the door to the bathroom.

She squealed with excitement. The bathroom was huge. A massive rolltop bath, a walk-in shower. A selection of soaps and potions and unguents that only a girl could appreciate.

Next to the bath, a set of shelves with a pile of fluffy, white towels and bathrobes.

Em turned the faucets on and hot water gushed out like a steaming, indoor Niagara Falls.

Troy helped himself to an apple and opened the doors to the balcony. He stood outside and lit up, knowing he had lost Emily to her ablution’s. There was no way he was getting her out of the bath for at least an hour, so he made himself comfortable and settled in for the wait.

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The dining table was laid with the finest crockery and cutlery.

Tag stared at the vast array of utensils in front of him, a look of consternation on his face. He recognized the knives and the forks and the spoons. But there were other accoutrements he had never seen before. And he had no idea what they might be used for. Some sort of pliers, a tiny little fork with only two prongs, a small mother-of-pearl spoon that looked like it was made for a doll’s house.

Sara entered the room and placed a few opened bottles of wine on the table.

‘Welcome,’ she greeted. ‘I was unsure of what you might want for dinner, so I instructed the chef to cook *monsieur* Baptist’s favorite dishes. I’m sure you will enjoy them.’

As she left the room, a waiter glided in. He was carrying a silver tray that held a large cone of crushed ice. On the top of the miniature ice mountain was a small glass receptacle.

With practiced hand he scooped a spoonful of the contents onto each person’s plate, followed it with a couple of crackers and then left.

Tag frowned. ‘What’s this black stuff?’

‘Caviar,’ said Emily.

‘What’s caviar when it’s at home?’

‘Fish eggs,’ explained Em. ‘You use the little mother-of-pearl spoon to put some on a cracker. Then you eat it.’

‘Do we have to?’

Muller chuckled. ‘Try some. It’s not bad.’

Tag scooped a small portion onto a cracker, plopped it into his mouth and chewed. Then he shrugged. ‘Fishy.’

‘Fishy?’ asked Muller. ‘That’s all you got to say about one of the most expensive delicacies in the world?’

‘Expensive?’ asked Tag.

‘Over a thousand dollars a pound.’

Tag shook his head. ‘Stupid.’

The next course arrived shortly after. Tag folded his arms across his chest. ‘Oh, come on. No way. Is this for real?’

In front of him, in their shells, were half a dozen snails in garlic butter.

‘It’s snails,’ said Emily.

‘Hey, girly, I know what it is. I seen them in the garden before. What I mean is, are we meant to eat them?’

‘You use the tongs to hold the shell,’ said Emily. ‘And then the little silver fork to get them out.’

Tag shook his head.

‘They’re okay,’ said Troy.

‘Sure,’ snapped Tag. ‘You a wolf. You eat raw animals and stuff. I ain’t gonna trust you on what’s good to chow. Tag is gonna give this one a hard pass.’

‘Suit yourself,’ said Troy. ‘If you aren’t going to eat them, pass the plate over.’

Tag slid the snails over to the wolfman with a shudder.

The next course arrived. Huge steaming platefuls of it.

‘This is tripe,’ said Troy. ‘Sheep’s guts.’

Tag grinned. ‘I know, wolfy. Us Jamaicans love our tripe ’n beans.’ The big man attacked his plate like a starving trencherman, using his spoon to shovel it in. Before the others had gotten half way through their plates, Tag was banging the table to get seconds. Then thirds.

Next came dessert. A mountain of light, fluffy, sweet cream and chocolate eclairs.

And finally, a selection of cheeses.

Tag leaned back in his chair and burped. ‘Ex-squeeze me,’ he chuckled. ‘Man, that started off not so well and ended real good. I’m so full I could explode.’

Troy selected a cigar from a humidor one of the waiters brought in, then he passed the selection to Muller and Tag.

He didn’t bother offering Emily as he knew she didn’t smoke.

‘Let’s take the rest of the evening off,’ said Emily. ‘Tomorrow, we get an early start and do a bit of reconnaissance. Scope out our target and go from there.’

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CHAPTER 27

The next warehouse was situated in a small, light industrial complex a mile outside the Nice town borders. A few of the buildings were occupied, and there were signs of some people. A couple of cars. A motorbike.

A faded sign outside the complex stated in French and English that the compound was scheduled for demolition, and was to be replaced by something called a mini-industrial-hive. Whatever the hell that was.

But the sign was at least three or four years old, and there was no trace of any work being done.

And if you looked closely at the target warehouse, you could see that it wasn't nearly as rundown as it initially seemed. The dirt on the windows was actually spray-paint. The ragged roof was still obviously water tight, and the roller doors showed signs of recent use, the hinges and gears well oiled. There were also fresh tire tracks heading into the warehouse via the roller doors.

'Very clever,' said Muller. 'If we hadn't been given this address there's no way we would have found the place.'

'There's a lot of people in the back part of the structure,' said Troy. 'I can smell them. They haven't bathed for a while. And, they stink of fear.'

'I'll go in through the back,' said Emily. 'That way, I can protect the prisoners and keep them calm. You guys hit the front and sides. Tag, front door, Muller go left. Troy, right.'

Tag nodded but didn't answer. He was still sulking because Emily had told him he couldn't bring Missus Jones to the party. She had also insisted both Tag and Muller use suppressors on their firearms. This was because, although there were not hundreds of potential observers, there were some. And Emily did not want to get innocents dragged into the operation for any reason. Even if it was as witnesses after the fact.

As a result, Muller swopped out his usual sawn-off shotgun for a Heckler and Koch submachine gun. Unlike the last place the team had hit, a full volume firefight in the warehouse would most definitely attract unwanted attention.

For the same reasons, Emily had also decided Troy should stay in his human form. Just in case someone spotted him.

Troy carried a pair of Maxim Nines. Semi-auto pistols with integral

suppressors. And although nothing actually silences a pistol to the point Hollywood would have us believe, it did reduce the volume to an acceptable level. Maybe as loud as a bible dropped onto a wooden table.

While they all headed to their assigned points of entry, Emily headed around to the rear of the warehouse, keeping low and out of sight. They hadn't bothered to synchronize watches or have any form of countdown; the plan was simple. Get in and kill the guards. Emily asked they attempt to keep at least one of the enemy alive for questioning. Because she knew this was only the beginning. And she was determined to track down and destroy all aspects of this corrupt and evil trafficking in human lives.

There was no rear entrance, but there were a series of windows, all covered with steel shutters. Emily eased her fingers under the edge of the first shutter and slowly took the strain. The steel began to deform and then, with a sharp pop, the rivets gave way.

She stopped and listened, checking if the noise had alerted anyone. After a full minute, she deemed it okay to continue and, flexing her muscles, she bent the steel shutter upwards until there was enough room to ingress.

Clambering over the sill, she entered a dark room.

A row of bunk beds was bolted to the one wall. Opposite, an empty chemical toilet. The place reeked of sweat and human waste and harsh antiseptic cleaning products.

There were no people, but she could hear voices from the room next door. But even her heightened hearing couldn't make out the words. Whoever it was, they were murmuring. Low, hoarse whispers.

She could smell their fear. A rank combination of cold sweat overlaid with an iron tang.

Walking softly, she crossed the room and listened at the door, checking if anyone was stationed outside.

Nothing, so she twisted the handle and pushed the door open, finding herself in a dimly lit corridor, no natural lighting, only a couple of energy saving globes. There were three more doors similar to the one she had just exited through.

Without moving, her extraordinary senses told her two of the rooms were occupied, the third empty.

Then her ears picked up the dull thud of Tag's suppressed Desert Eagles, followed immediately by a short scream that cut off as a gurgle. Muller's sword at work.

Grasping the first doorhandle, Emily twisted until the lock popped, then she opened the door and walked in.

The first thing that struck her was the stink of the overflowing chemical toilet. The next was how overcrowded the room was, and

she wondered why they didn't simply put some of the prisoners into one of the empty rooms.

The room was full of females. No men. Obviously, their captors had segregated the sexes. The girls cowered as far away from the door as possible. Some glanced at Emily, but most stared at the floor, too terrified to look up.

'Hi,' said Emily. 'Please, don't be scared. I'm here to get you out. I'm a friend.'

Still the girls cringed away from her, and she could hear their hearts beating and their breath rasping in their throats.

'I promise,' continued Emily. 'I tell you what,' she continued. 'You all wait here. I'm going to open the next door and then we'll all leave together. Don't worry about the people who took you, my friends are making sure they never do that to anyone ever again.'

Then the Daywalker backed out of the room, stepped over to the next door and opened it in the same fashion. Brute strength overcoming the lock with ease.

The room was identical. But in this case, there were perhaps half the number of occupants. It seemed that the flesh-traders either preferred females or simply found them easier to kidnap.

The men were not quite as cowed as the girls. The mere fact that they were not as packed together and their chemical toilet had yet to overflow meant they had a little more fire left in them. But not enough to challenge anyone.

'Hey, guys,' greeted Emily. 'Listen up, I'm here with friends. We've come to take you home. Follow me, we need to pick up the girls and get out of here.'

Two of the men had a brief chat and Emily picked up that at least one of them didn't speak English. So, she quickly repeated her message in French, Italian and German.

There was a collective sigh of relief from all present and they followed her back to the girls' room. Then she took all of them to the window where she had gained entry and, with another display of brute force that caused a collective intake of breath from the prisoners, she tore off the steel shutter and punched out the window to allow an easy exit.

'Right,' she instructed. 'Wait here, all of you. If you go traipsing off and we can't find you when we're done, you'll miss the bus. So, stay. Sit down, below the window line and keep quiet. I'm going back in. Trust me, I won't be long and then we'll get you out of here.'

And with that, Emily jumped back in, looking for the flesh traders.

Time for some retribution.

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CHAPTER 28

‘I asked you not to kill this one,’ snapped Muller.

Tag scowled. ‘Didn’t mean to.’

‘Tag, you hit him so hard his head literally exploded.’

‘Hey, he stabbed me,’ argued the big man.

‘So what? You’re always getting stabbed. It’s no reason to burst someone’s head.’

Tag folded his arms in front of his chest and stuck his bottom lip out like a sulky toddler. ‘Hell, you can’t bring Missus Jones, don’t punch people inna head, do this, do that. I’ve had enough, you take point then.’

Muller rolled his eyes. ‘Fine, I’ll take point.’

Tag shook his head and stepped in front of the Knight. ‘No. Tag takes point, because he be fine if he gets stabbed. Or shot. Sorry, I know the girly asked us to keep a few alive. I’ll make more of an effort.’

The big man had entered through the front door via his usual method. *Id Est*, smashing it into kindling as he simply charged through it. Then he proceeded to exterminate everyone he came across. By the time he met up with Muller they had taken out seven people between them.

In the background they could hear Troy’s nine mil’s double tapping as he took down a few more.

Then the two of them proceeded towards the rear of the warehouse, wending their way through office partitions, storage areas and bathrooms, killing as they went.

Now they were hoping they hadn’t run out of live targets, because Emily would be pissed if they killed everyone and there was no one left to question.

Especially since she had basically given them a direct order. And they both knew from experience – when Emily Hawk, Daywalker, pack member, werewolf, Shadowhunter and leader of the gargoyles, gave you an order, well, you darn well better follow it.

Someone fired at them from behind one of the desks in an open partition. The slug creased Tag’s arm. The big man ran towards the source of the shot. As he did, Muller shouted out.

‘Don’t kill him.’

Another shot rang out, but went high. And then Tag was on him. Throwing the desk out of the way, the big man grabbed the gunman’s

arm and twisted, forcing him to drop his pistol. At the same time, he gave him a compound, green twig fracture that splintered his arm so badly it flopped down like it had been deboned.

Muller ran up and used zip-ties to strap the man's arms and legs together, handling him roughly, caring not a jot for his injury. Then he ripped the front of the man's shirt off and rammed it into his mouth as a gag.

'Good job,' the Knight said to Tag. 'Let's see if we can find another.'

They left the hapless guard lying on the floor and moved on.

Before they came across anyone else, they ran into Troy. He was carrying an unconscious guard over his left shoulder while holding one of his pistols in his right hand.

'Hey,' said Tag. 'You got one. We got one as well.' He looked at Troy's captive and snorted. 'Ours is bigger than yours.'

'Not a competition,' said Troy.

'Whatever. Just saying.'

Tag went back to pick up his captor and when he returned Emily was with them.

She patted Tag on the back. 'Well done,' she praised him. 'You managed to keep one alive.'

Tag beamed. 'Yeah, and he shot me. But I still didn't punch his head off.'

'Right, guys,' said Emily. 'I freed the prisoners, snuck them out the back through a window. They're waiting there for us. Ran into another two guards on the way here. Sadly, after seeing the way they treated those prisoners, I wasn't as controlled as Tag. So, they're both dead. And sort of in pieces.

'Muller, can I leave you and Tag to question these two while Troy and I take care of the kidnappees?'

The Knight nodded his affirmation. 'I'll text the okay to the local priest. I spoke to him last night and he's got transport, a doctor and a few nuns ready to help. How many?'

'About thirty. Twenty girls, ten guys. Most of the girls are in really bad condition. Staved, dehydrated and abused. The guys are a little better off.'

'I'll tell him,' said Muller. 'You go. The big man and I will wring these two dry.'

'I'll catch up with you,' said Troy. 'I want to go through whatever papers, laptops, computers I can find. That okay?'

Emily nodded. 'Let's get to it, gentlemen. Meet out front when you're finished.'

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CHAPTER 29

‘Smirnov wasn’t here,’ said Tag. ‘Apparently, he spends most of his time in Paris. Living the high life.’

Emily watched the victims file onto a bus the local church had hired, courtesy of her apparently unlimited funds. Some of the girls needed help walking. One was on a stretcher, a drip attached to her arm

Emily had spoken to a few of the group and she was doing all she could to contain her righteous anger. Many of the girls and some of the boys had been sexually molested. A few had been tortured. For no reason other than a couple of the guard’s sick and perverted concepts of pleasure.

After she heard the stories, she returned to the two guards still alive and, ensuring Muller had gotten all he could from them, she summoned Deathwalker and dismembered them.

No one attempted to stop her.

‘As soon as these people are comfortable, we find out more about this Smirnov character,’ said Emily. ‘Like where he lives.’

Muller nodded. ‘I already have all of my contacts working on it. Don’t worry, we’ll find him.’

‘And then we kill him,’ said Emily. ‘Slowly.’

Tag frowned and walked over to the young girl. ‘Hey, baby-girl,’ he said. ‘You know what Tag’s main goal in life is? It’s to protect you. Your life before mine, always. You know that?’

Emily nodded.

‘It’s not just physical though. You be careful now, beware the darkness. You know how you can get. Remember why we do what we do. It’s not revenge, it’s vengeance.’

Emily turned to face the big man and he took an involuntary step back; such was the strength of her anger. The power of her coercion was a physical thing. A mental bludgeon that she sometimes wielded without knowing. And sometimes, without caring. Because, with Emily Hawk, the dark was always close. A part of her she fought against constantly.

Then she saw the look on her friends face and she wilted. ‘Sorry, Tag,’ she said. ‘You have saved my life so many times now I can’t count. I don’t mean to lash out like that, it’s just that I’m so angry. How can people act like that? Torture, rape. Selling people as food?’

‘They didn’t know,’ interjected Muller. ‘Obviously they knew about

the rape and stuff, I mean they didn't know about the vampires. They thought they were involved in simple people trafficking. Sex trade. Slavery.'

'They are still evil,' insisted Emily.

'I agree,' concurred the Knight. 'And they have been justly punished. Now, we find the head of the snake and cut it off.'

Emily smiled.

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CHAPTER 30

Jebe put together a small strike force. Five members. One Chernobyl elite. One assistant *Nosferatu* of at least Adept level. Plus, three qualified familiars.

His game plan was to make many of these teams send them out across Europe, tasking them with tracking down the *Triginta Argenteous.*

But he couldn't just send them in cold. They needed some sort of starting point.

Three Ancients, all over a thousand years old, were present to give advice and share their knowledge. The eldest, Saladin Zaid had been turned one thousand eight hundred years ago, as a twenty-year-old man living in Palestine.

The other two ancients had lived in Germania some thousand years ago when they were turned.

The three of them had caucused together and between them were listing any information they could that might pertain to either the Great Betrayer, King Euric or the *Triginta.*

To be honest, Jebe was a little disappointed at the lack of depth of information the three Ancients managed to dredge up. Generally, it was hearsay based on rumors based on even more hearsay. But one had to start somewhere.

Together with the Ancients, Jebe had garnered a further six familiars to assist. None of these were historians. Instead, they were information specialists. Four were international private detectives and two were identical twins, Monique and Mandrake DaCosta, cyber-info experts.

Unfortunately, the relic they were attempting to find was steeped in misinformation and rumor, and hidden by what seemed to be an almost total lack of knowledge.

The cyber-twins were trawling the exhibits and warehoused stocks of every major museum in Europe. This would have been an unsurmountable task but for the fact they had developed an automated program to do the actual trawling. Their time was spent hacking into the respective museums data bases and downloading the software.

They had developed a second program to search chat rooms and emails and social media sites to recognize any mention of a list of keywords that might relate to the relic.

The major problem with this was not lack of information – rather it was a surfeit of the stuff. A veritable info-overload. Already, the twins had requested a few assistants. Jebe had sent for an army of them. After all, there was no shortage of familiars. People frantic to share in the *Nosferatu* version of immortality. Desperate to become more than they were.

Of course, most of them were mere wannabees. Goth teenagers, social misfits and pariahs. On the whole, these would all end up as food, after they had performed whatever useful tasks assigned them.

But some were worthy of more careful contemplation. Scholars, warriors, leaders. These would be promoted within the organization and after a while, tried, tested and weighed as to the possibility of being turned.

Those were the sort of people Jebe was using for his quest.

At the moment, the twins had given Jebe three possible targets. Two museums and one private collection. All were in Germany. He immediately dispatched three of the detectives to the source in order to get more intel.

He spent the next twenty minutes or so ensuring that the twins had all they needed to keep researching and, as he was about to leave, one of his *Nosferatu* Adept lieutenants ran in.

'Sir, I have an urgent message from Pytor Smirnov.'

Jebe frowned. Smirnov was a man he did not like. A mere grocer in the scheme of things. Nevertheless, he was important to the house in that he supplied them and many of their allies and future allies with food. Human livestock. As such, he qualified as an ally himself.

'Talk to me,' commanded Jebe.

'His warehouse in Nice has been hit,' informed the Adept. 'Wiped out. All of the stock has been taken. He is worried that his men may have talked, and whoever did this will come for him. He is already well protected by his own men; however, he is afraid,' the vampire concluded, unable to hide the scorn in his voice.

Jebe raised an eyebrow. 'Well, we cannot have our main supplier exterminated,' he said. 'I shall dispatch a task force to Paris immediately via one of the house jets. Inform him they will arrive tomorrow morning. Tell him to show them the utmost respect and to keep out of their way. Warn him that the team will be led by one of the inner circle. One of the Chernobyl superiors. He will come with another *Nosferatu* and ten familiars. Go.'

The lieutenant bowed deeply and sped to do his duty.

Jebe left the room. He decided he would send Leonid Lebedev. A monster of a vampire who had been savagely deformed by the radiation during the Chernobyl incident. But his strength, speed and dedication to the cause were unprecedented. Also, it would expose

Pytor Smirnov to the reality of whom he was dealing with. If the coward was afraid now, he had no idea what real fear was.

But when he met Leonid, that would change.

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CHAPTER 31

Emily owned a large apartment in Paris.

In fact, she also owned an apartment in the Fae city of Pareen that was situated underneath Paris. Both were courtesy of Sylvian's legacy.

But instead of staying at either, she booked the team of hunters into an hotel Because, even though it had been a year since the French Bloodborn's death, her emotions were still too raw to stay in his old house. A hotel was fine for their needs and far less personal.

And because funds were no problem, she had pushed the boat out.

The Prince De Galles Hotel. Avenue George V, Paris.

She had procured a suite of rooms on the top floor at the outrageous cost of over ten thousand dollars a night. She knew it was an unnecessary expense, but she had the cash, and sometimes you've just got to say – what the hell. It's only money.

Three rooms, all linked by interleading doors. A central dining area, a bar, a small indoor pool and a private, plant filled conservatory.

Troy took one look at the huge double bed in their room, smirked and wiggled his eyebrows at Emily. In turn, she threw a pillow at him.

Muller simply chucked his kit into the room, after taking it from the bellhop, and went to the fully stocked bar for a beer.

Tag was like a kid in a candy store.

'Hey, cool,' he yelled from his room. 'Check it out. Tiny bottles of shampoo. And bath bubbles.' He laughed out loud. 'Teeny soaps. Man, I feel like a giant.' He ran through to Em's suite, holding a bathrobe and a pair of slippers. 'Can we use these?' he asked. 'I mean, is it free?'

Troy chuckled. 'Sure. But I doubt it will fit you. That's the problem with this one-size-fits-all. For you and I, it normally means, one-size-doesn't-fit-all.'

Tag tried pulling the bathrobe on over his shirt, but Troy was correct, it was far too small.

'Darn.'

Emily laughed. 'If you want a robe that fits, I'll buy you one later.'

Tag grinned. 'Cool. I'm hungry. When are we eating?'

'Soon,' answered Emily. 'Apparently they have an amazing sushi restaurant in the hotel.'

Tag frowned. 'Isn't that raw fish?'

Em nodded.

'No way,' said Tag. 'You've already tried to make me eat snails and fish eggs. Now raw fish? No. Let's find a place that serves steak. Huge,

bleeding portions. And fries.'

Troy nodded his agreement. 'I'm with the big man. Steak. Rare. Humongous.'

Emily rolled her eyes. 'Fine,' she said. 'Steak. Then we find the target and do a recce.'

Tag gave a thumb up. 'Excellent.'

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CHAPTER 32

Leonid Lebedev and his team arrived that morning. Two blacked out SUV's picked them up at a private airport and transported them and their equipment to Smirnov's palatial dwelling on the outskirts of Paris.

Smirnov's residence wasn't geared for the children of the night. There were drapes, but they weren't rubber backed, and many of them didn't even cover the windows enough to prevent the sunlight shining in.

As such, Lebedev had tasked his ten familiars, all of whom were experienced mercenaries, with daylight guard duties.

Lebedev and Karl, his Adept lieutenant, would take care of the night when it was possible for them to roam freely.

When the Smirnov was introduced to the Chernobyl vamp, he quailed visibly. He had been warned to expect someone a little … different. But when actually confronted by the seven-foot tall, massively muscled, misshapen and deformed creature that was Leonid Lebedev, he lost control of his emotions and literally cowered in fear.

And it didn't help that Lebedev did not make the slightest effort to control his massive powers of glamor. Radiating fear-inducement and contempt like a lighthouse giving off light. To be honest, terrifying the meat to the point of almost senseless terror was one of the only forms of enjoyment left to him.

Gone were the sumptuous balls and parties of old. The hunt and seduction and eventual feasting on beautiful maidens. Not the way he and his Chernobyl brethren now looked.

They had swopped suave sophistication and eternal good looks for terrifying physical deformation and unbelievable levels of power.

And now, as the sun began to crawl behind the horizon, it was his turn to protect the cowardly meat supplier. Personally, he would rather tear him limb from limb and spit on his remains. But the Blood King had ordered his protection, and the *Krov Tsar's* word was the ultimate law.

Nevertheless, Lebedev considered the entire mission to be a waste of time. Smirnov was already extremely well protected. He had over thirty well-armed and experienced bodyguards. All ex-special forces, mainly Russian *Spetsnaz* with a sprinkling of Israeli *Sayeret* and even a couple of South African Recces. No force of less than company strength would be capable of even getting close to him.

Lebedev lit a cigarette. He could no longer really taste them, but he had been smoking for over two hundred years, and the familiar movements and rigmarole brought him a minuscule of comfort. He could have smoked the finest, hand rolled Turkish cigarettes if he were so inclined. But instead, Lebedev smoked Russian Belomorkanals. The strongest cigarette ever made. And the cheapest. Constructed from cardboard and fifth grade tobacco, they smelled like a burning pile of manure.

And Lebedev was vaguely amused at the distaste he registered on others faces when he lit the execrable tubes of tabaco and filled the room with the foul-smelling smoke.

Small pleasures.

The vampire took a final drag, dropped the butt on the carpet and ground it in with his heel. He was about to light another when, despite the onerous reek of the cheap tabaco, he smelled it. A scent so ingrained he could never mistake it. Although, to be fair, this one was a little different. Less animal. More human.

Werewolf.

He reacted instantly, calling out to Karl as he sprinted towards the source of the new scent. As he ran, he heard a sound that was so incongruous he almost faltered. It was the sound of a General Electric M134 Minigun spewing out lead at a rate of 6000 rounds a minute.

Part of him thought he must be mistaken. The M134 was a weapon designed to be mounted on a helicopter or armored vehicle. And there had been no sound of any automobile approaching.

The sound of returning small arms fire crackled through the air, and then the Minigun spoke again.

And in the background, Lebedev swore he heard someone shout – *Say hello to Missus Jones.*

Obviously, he must have heard incorrectly.

Turning the corner, he skidded slightly on the marble floor as he entered the entrance hall to the mansion. The place looked like a charnel house. Several bodies were scattered about the hall, blood coated the walls and even the ceiling, and the insanely rapid fire from the Minigun had chewed up walls, chandeliers and furniture.

He heard screaming and growling from down the corridor and at the same time, Karl joined him, blurring across the room to stand next to him.

‘I can smell werewolf,’ said his lieutenant.

Lebedev nodded his agreement, the movement causing the lumps and tumors on his face to wobble in concert.

Karl who was similarly affected, didn’t notice.

Together, they followed the noise.

The battle seemed to be coming from the huge ballroom. The

double doors were open and the sounds of small arms fire and cries of both fear and anger reverberated through the building.

Both vampires blurred into the room, crossing behind the local guards and taking cover behind one of the upturned tables. A quick glance belied Lebedev's previous statement that it would take a full company to breach their defenses. It now seemed that what it would actually take was a wolfman, a young blonde supermodel and two humans to do so.

'What is that?' asked Karl.

'Wolfman,' answered Lebedev. 'An Omega werewolf. Very rare. Very dangerous.'

Karl shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'That,' he pointed at Emily.

Lebedev was about to snap at the younger vampire when he actually looked. Karl was correct. What the hell was that? At first glance she appeared to be a normal human female. But if you applied the smallest amount of attention you could immediately sense an aura of unbelievable power. And danger. Almost as if … no. It wasn't possible.

'She's a vampire,' said Lebedev. 'And an ancient. And something else.'

'I thought she was a werewolf,' answered Karl.

'No, wait. Yes. Could it be *Her*?'

'Do you mean…'

'The Daywalker,' stated Lebedev.

As Lebedev made his statement, the final guard fell to a burst of fire from the Minigun.

A strange ringing silence filled the air.

And the two vampires stood up. The Minigun did not scare them. They knew they were simply too fast to be shot. The only way to take down one of the brethren of Chernobyl was to go old school.

Mano-a-mano.

And when it came to physical combat. The two deformed and overpowered monsters were at the very acme of the class.

'Prepare to die,' declaimed Lebedev.

'Ooh, ugly,' said Tag with a shudder.

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CHAPTER 33

Emily saw the two monsters stand up from behind the overturned table and flinched at the sight of them.

They were beyond doubt the most deformed, warped and misshapen creatures she had ever seen. It seemed as though they might once have been human. Or at least humanoid. But now they looked like some sort of troll, sculpted by careless hand and then damaged by vandals.

Humped backs, massive shoulders and arms, faces full of tumorous growths, fingers with too many joints and eyes that blazed bright red.

And huge. The one was at least seven feet tall and must have weighed five hundred pounds.

Both of them radiated an aura of power and great danger. So much so the very air about them shimmered with it.

'They stink of Vampire,' growled Troy. 'But they look like no *Nosferatu* I have seen before.'

Tag opened up with Missus Jones, the Minigun chewing up the table and the wall behind it as it spewed out a hundred rounds in a fraction of a second. But it was to no avail. The two creatures moved so fast it was as if they had teleported. One moment they were behind the table, the next, they had separated to opposite sides of the room.

Emily tensed, ready for battle. Never before had she seen such speed. They were faster than Troy. Maybe even faster than her. Summoning Deathwalker she moved forward.

As did Tag and Muller.

Troy held back slightly, positioning himself on the side, ready to flank them.

None of the hunters had to bother about the human guards. All of the ones on the ground floor had already been dispatched and, although they knew there were more in the mansion, they were as naught compared to the pair of monsters in front of them right now.

Tag dropped Missus Jones and drew his two Desert Eagles, forsaking firepower for maneuverability.

Muller held his sword in his right hand and his shotgun in his left. The two of them advanced on the slightly smaller vamp, leaving the larger one for Em and Troy.

Emily's usual supreme confidence was tempered slightly by the monster's expression. Even through the tumors and hanging wattles of flesh, she could see that he wasn't in the slightest bit nervous, even

though he was facing an Omega wolfman and Em, who was also someone of obvious power. In fact, the creature looked keen. Like he was finally facing an enemy worthy of his attention.

She heard Tag's Eagles thunder and Muller's shotgun boom in concert. Then she heard a meaty thud and, out of the corner of her eye, she saw both Tag and Muller sail across the room and smash into the opposite wall.

A quick glance showed her Muller was out for the count and Tag, who was badly injured, would take a few seconds to recover. But what surprised her the most was that the vamp who had struck the two had moved so fast she didn't sense him attacking.

With a frown she gestured towards the vamp who had just dispatched her friends. 'Troy, take him. I'll get this one.'

She saw Troy attack and at the same time she moved forward, Deathwalker held in both hands, ready to rock and roll.

Her opponent leered at her. 'Daywalker, I presume.'

Emily didn't answer. She was there to fight, not exchange pleasantries. Piling on the speed, she ran forward and flicked the axe at the monster's head, spinning as she did so to ensure her back wasn't exposed.

The creature's response took her by total surprise. She expected him to dodge. Perhaps lean away from the blow or duck underneath. As such, she followed her swing and spin with a low-level kick, hoping to sweep his legs.

Instead, he leaped into the air, raking his talons along Emily's face as he did. Blood sprayed across the room and Emily dropped and rolled to avoid any follow up strike. But the monster moved with her, anticipating her move and stamping down on her as she rolled.

Emily felt her ribs break as the monster's foot landed, but remembering Bastian's instructions, she kept moving. To be still was to die. Throwing herself forward, she performed a half twist and hit the wall with both feet, flexing and springing back, the axe in front of her as she did.

Again, the deformed vampire shifted to one side, but Emily's athleticism had taken him by surprise and the point of one of the butterfly shaped blades bit deep into his right shoulder.

Meanwhile, Troy had his plate full with the second vampire. This fight was different. Eschewing fast moves and athletic spins, the Wolfman and the vampire stood toe-to-toe and traded blows, their surfeit of testosterone overwhelming any sense of tactics. This was merely two males battling for dominance. And usually, Troy would be more than happy to take part in such a basic, strength heavy contest. After all, he was Omega.

But for the first time in his life, he was shocked at his opponent's

strength. And speed.

If he was entirely honest with himself, he would have to admit the vampire shaded him in both departments. But he was Omega, and the Pack leader would never admit he was outgunned. Not to his friends, not to his pack, not to his team mates.

And never to himself.

Redoubling his efforts, the wolfman fought back with all he had.

Emily circled her creature, feinting every now and then with Deathwalker, trying to draw the vampire into a false move. However, he was a wily opponent, ancient beyond Emily's imagination, and his experience covered thousands of battles.

But Emily was a combination of two of the *Nosferatu's* most dedicated mortal enemies. Werewolf and Shadowhunter. She was also – Daywalker. So, what she lacked in experience she made up for in sheer skill and talent.

And where Lebedev had fought both man, and vampire and werewolf before, he had never fought anyone who was a combination of the deadliest parts of all three.

Lebedev glanced down at the wound in his shoulder. It wasn't that deep and should have healed up almost instantly. But for some reason it was still bleeding.

Emily chuckled. 'Meet Deathwalker,' she said. 'You will find it's not so easy to heal from his wounds, you evil bloodsucker.' Then she swung the axe in a complicated series of cuts and slashes, displaying an awesome control of the weapon.

But Lebedev was less than impressed. 'Ah, the arrogance of youth,' he noted. 'Child, I have faced some of the best axe men in the world. I have fought on the walls of Constantinople and in the vastness of the Steppes. Your paltry skills are as naught to me.'

And to prove his point, he shifted behind Emily and once again his talons tore deeply into her.

She flicked out with her axe, but he had already moved out of her reach.

Part of her attention picked up on Troy. For some reason he was standing head-to-head with the other twisted vampire and trading blows like some sort of kindergarten-based macho-man contest.

Tag had recovered and was reloading his pistols.

Muller lay still, but breathing, lights out.

Lebedev continued moving, walking in a slow circle around Emily. In turn, she spun her axe in a figure eight, waiting for him to strike.

She heard Tag's Eagles boom and then Troy growled. 'Hey, stop that. This one's mine.'

A flicker of a grin crossed Emily's face. Boys!

As the vampire moved around her, Emily figured she had the edge

on him when it came to maneuverability. On the other hand, he was as fast, if not faster, and definitely stronger. Which was extremely disconcerting. She had fought Ancients and Masters before, and none of them had come close to her in any of the aforementioned traits.

With that in mind, Emily flexed her legs and sprang upwards, somersaulting over the monster and slashing down with her axe as she did. The blades caught him on the side of his head, cutting deeply. But his skull was covered so thickly in lumps and growths the axe didn't actually penetrate to the skull. As Emily landed, she could see the wound was already closing, despite Deathwalker's power.

And for the first time in a while, she felt a tiny shimmer of doubt. She knew she could beat this monster, yet not as easily as she had become accustomed.

Lebedev placed his hands on his hips and laughed out loud. He seemed genuinely amused, but in all fairness, it was difficult to tell, such was the horror of his visage.

'I have heard stories of you,' he announced. 'The Daywalker. The Shadowhunter. The Pack member who killed one of our most powerful brethren. How disappointing the reality is. How banal and predictable you are. A monkey doing acrobatics, when I expected a warrior. You disgust me, little girl.'

Emily felt her anger rise. How dare this bloodsucking leech say she was disgusting? A monster that literally murdered humans to live. The epitome of selfish evil.

With a gesture she banished Deathwalker. Her anger was such that she needed to use her hands. Her talons and teeth. She wanted to get down and dirty with this monster. And not in a good way.

With a conscious effort, Emily dropped her barriers and allowed her dark side to gain ascendency.

Her jaw elongated slightly, and her vampire-canines grew. Talons extended from her fingers and her muscles swelled. Her eyes shone redly and a thin layer of fur covered her arms.

She was now a perfect blend of the most powerful aspects of her various powers. And it was most definitely a case of the sum of the parts was more than the whole. A practical example of perfect synergy.

Bloodlust rushed to her head, almost overwhelming her with the desire … no, the *need* to kill. It was a feeling Emily had been desperately trying to avoid, because she knew, that way lay madness.

And then it was there, and she was filled with the divine madness of battle.

Lebedev flinched when he saw the change come over her, her aura changing from deadly warrior to insane berserker.

With a screech of anger, Emily threw herself at the monster.

Lebedev moved, putting all he had into his speed. But it was like Emily was just that microsecond ahead of him. Like she could see into the future. Wherever he turned, she was there, with tooth and claw and blood.

Lebedev's composure cracked as the Daywalker began to tear him apart. Bones splintered, huge slabs of flesh were sliced from his body, fingers were ripped from his hands and his skull shattered as Emily piledrove her fists into the back of his head.

After mere seconds of hyper-fast combat, Lebedev fell to his knees, his awesome powers of recovery insufficient to keep up with the savage beating he was taking.

Emily stood over him, talons outstretched towards his face.

And he looked up at her. And nodded. He had been fairly beaten.

'Well done, Daywalker' he said, genuinely impressed. 'Unfortunately,' he continued. 'I am but one of many. And I am not even the most powerful amongst us. When the *Krov Tsar* descends upon you with all of his house, you will stand no chance.'

Emily sneered at the vanquished monster and with a final flourish, she called forth Deathwalker and swung the blades down.

Lebedev's head leaped off his shoulders and rolled across the room.

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CHAPTER 34

Troy flicked out a quick combination, tagging the vampire with a flurry of blows to his head.

In return, the vampire launched a massive roundhouse kick. The wolfman hunkered down and took the hit. The power of the kick rocked him back on his feet and he grunted in pain.

Then the two of them stepped apart as if by prior agreement, both allowing themselves time to heal.

Troy held a warning hand up to Tag who was itching to unleash his Desert Eagles on the monster. The wolfman was determined to take the creature by himself.

He was about launch himself back into the fight when he saw, out of the corner of his eye, the Knight of the Holy See rise to his feet and shake his head.

Muller took one look at the vampire facing Troy and with surprising speed, hauled a glass flask from his webbing and threw it at the creature.

'The power of Christ compels me,' he shouted.

The flask of Holy Water shattered against the vampire's tumor encrusted head and immediately started to burn him, the power of light scorching deep into the evil entities lumpen flesh. Karl shrieked, a long-drawn-out sound like a steam whistle, only deeper. Then he fell to his knees, clawing at his face, shredding his own flesh in an attempt to stop the burning.

'Oh come on,' yelled Troy. 'I told you guys; that one was mine.'

Muller, who had just regained consciousness, looked baffled.

With a sigh of discontent, Troy grabbed the screaming vampire by his head and twisted, snapping his neck and then, with one more mighty heave, tearing his head off and dropping it to the floor to partner Lebedev's detached cranium.

Tag walked up to the pair of heads and emptied his Eagles into them, reducing them to little more than slightly spherical lumps of mashed flesh and bone.

'What was that for?' asked Troy.

The big man shrugged. 'These monsters were seriously gnarly,' he answered. 'Just wanted to make sure they didn't reconstitute or nothing.'

'Fair enough,' conceded the wolfman.

Emily drew a deep breath as Troy approached her.

‘You okay?’ he asked.

She nodded. ‘Yep. Just need to center myself. Then we find Smirnov and get rid of the rest of his guards.’

‘Cool,’ responded the wolfman. ‘Tell us when you’re good to go.’

Tag took out a roll of bandage and proceeded to wrap the wound on Muller’s head, staunching the slow but steady flow of blood.

‘Those things were bad,’ said Muller.

‘No crap?’ quipped Tag. ‘They dodged Missus Jones and then put the slap down on you and me like we was little chillun. Been a while since I been manhandled like that. And Troy’s less than happy ’cause you Holy-watered his one.’

‘Not my fault,’ said Muller. ‘I came to, saw the wolfman battling it out and thought I’d give him a hand. Didn’t know he’d called shotgun.’

Tag chuckled. ‘Don’t sweat it. That feel better?’

Muller touched the bandage and nodded. ‘Got a headache, but that will pass.’

‘I’m ready,’ interjected Emily. ‘Let’s find this murdering slave trader and make him wished he was never born.’

The team followed Emily as she exited the ballroom. Troy stuck close behind her, his nose checking ahead of them, ensuring no one tried to ambush the team.

There was no one left alive downstairs and it was obvious the rest of the personal protection squad had closed in around their boss and were most likely ensconced in a defendable area or room.

They proceeded up the stairs and started a room-to-room search.

Calls of, ‘clear’, sounded out as they went through the rooms.

No one was present.

They worked their way up to the top floor, climbing the stairway which opened out into a large lobby or landing. The area was vast, and most of it was covered in small groups of potted plants. Everything from shrubs to flowers to small trees. Nestled in amongst the jungle of plants were occasional chairs, coffee tables and fish tanks filled with tropical fish. At the far right stood a large aviary. Parrots, Cockatoos, Budgies and various other varieties of brightly feathered birds.

Tag nodded in approval. ‘Nice,’ he said. ‘It’s like being outside when you’re inside. I like it.’

Muller snorted. ‘I’ve always been of the belief that houses were invented to keep the outside where it belongs. Not for me, sharing my home with random fauna and flora.’

‘Boys,’ said Emily. ‘Concentrate. Troy, what’s your nose tell you? Where are they?’

The wolfman tested the air. ‘There,’ he growled. ‘Behind the big

bird cage thing.'

'Aviary,' corrected Muller.

'Whatever.'

They walked over to the aviary, and sure enough, there was a concealed door behind it. The cage itself was shaped to provide easy access.

Emily ran her hand over it. 'Cold,' she observed. 'Feels like its steel. Thick. Can't see how it locks. Must be electronic. Maybe Tag could break it down, probably not.'

The big man patted Missus Jones. 'Got five hundred rounds here that beg to differ,' he said.

Muller stepped forward and examined the door carefully. Then he took out a dagger and scored the wall on the right-hand side, etching a line in the plaster. 'Shoot there,' he told Tag. 'It will do no good firing at the door itself; we need to destroy the hinges and their mountings.'

Tag nodded. 'Block you ears,' he warned, and he depressed the trigger. The roar of the Minigun filled the room sending the birds into a frantic cacophony of terrified noise. Five hundred rounds of 7.72mm FMJ tore into the wall, chewing up the plaster and splitting the brickwork behind it.

As the barrels of the gatling gun spun to a halt, Emily tapped Troy on the shoulder. 'Hit it,' she commanded.

Four hundred pounds of wolfman ran shoulder first into the steel door, tearing it from its weakened housing and punching it into the room.

Two assault rifles opened up as the door hit the floor. Troy took three rounds to the chest while the rest of the slugs ricocheted off the walls behind him. He fell to the floor as his flesh started to heal.

Missus Jones was out of ammo, so Tag drew his Eagles and fired at the pair of assailants. Muller joined in, his shotgun booming out its defiance.

The two shooters were thrown across the room by the concentrated firepower. Emily followed up with Deathwalker, decapitating both of them in swift succession.

And then there was one.

A short, unprepossessing man, shaped like a pear with twig-like arms, thick eyeglasses, an obvious toupee and an expensive suit. Tears ran down his cheeks.

Emily walked up to him. 'Smirnov?'

He nodded.

'Right,' she said. 'This is how things are going to happen. You will tell me everything you can about your operation. People, places, bank details – everything. Every time you hesitate or I suspect you are

withholding information,' she held up Deathwalker. 'I remove a finger. Understand?'

The Russian nodded.

An hour later Emily looked at Muller. 'Anything else you can think of?'

The Knight shook his head.

'Troy, Tag?'

They both emulated Muller's response.

Emily nodded and raised the axe high.

'Mercy?' whimpered Smirnov.

'Sorry,' replied Emily. 'We're fresh out.'

And the blades dropped.

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CHAPTER 35

Gunter Meyer called himself a private detective. He was based in Munich, Germany and worked out of a small office situated in one of the less fashionable areas of the city. He had no staff but didn't work alone, as he often used outside contractors.

Because, although Gunter referred to himself as a private detective, a more accurate description might have been, industrial spy. Or sometimes even, a procurer of wanted items presently owned by someone else.

Basically, a thief and an infiltrator.

But Gunter was not an assassin. For that, and for various other jobs that required a more physical approach, he used outside help.

This was one of those other jobs.

Gunter had been tasked by his primary, a man he had never met but knew as, Jebe Zurgadai, to find out whether a certain someone had a certain antiquity in their possession.

The person in point was a man known to all as, *Die Kettensage.* Or in English, the Chainsaw.

And the Chainsaw was not the sort of man you crossed. Or at least, not the sort of man you got caught crossing.

The antiquity was described as a necklace or torc made from a series of silver Roman Denarias circa 33AD. It was rumored that the Chainsaw had the said necklace in his possession.

Gunter was not surprised. The Chainsaw was well, known for his huge collection of art and antiquities. The man was obsessed with them. Gunter knew for a fact that the gangster owned at least one lost Chagall and two Picassos. All gained illegally and displayed openly in his mansion.

The necklace of Roman coins, however, was allegedly kept in a strongroom that doubled as a display area for the Chainsaw's most treasured items. Gunter had checked with various reliable sources and they had confirmed the Chainsaw did indeed own some sort of object crafted from Roman Denaria. Gunter was sure it could be little else than what Jebe was seeking.

Bearing this in mind, he hired a team he had used before. A crack selection of safe busters, cat burglars and strongarm men. Six all in all. Then he paid them an obscene amount of money, half up front, to steal the coin necklace. Cost was no object as Jebe had promised almost untold wealth to the person who provided him with the object.

Gunter had no idea why anyone would offer so much for what seemed like a minor treasure, but his was not to reason why, his was simply to obtain the goods and get paid.

And now the only surviving member of the team stood opposite him, bleeding badly from two gunshot wounds. One in his shoulder, the other in his right thigh.

'The only reason I got away was because I was the getaway driver,' said Jonny *'the wheel'* Abel. 'Charlie kept his cell on so I could hear how the operation was playing out. You know, so I could be ready when they exited. But they ran into trouble almost straight away. Some sort of electronic area sensor that wasn't in the blueprints.

'And then the shooting started. Man, it was a real firefight. Everybody shooting at everybody else.

'Finally, they got hold of Charlie. All I could hear was him begging for them not to cut him. Then they started asking him questions … I couldn't listen any more. The screaming. Man, the screaming. So, I cut the connection and started to drive off. That's when some of the sentries spotted me. Opened up on the car. I was lucky they didn't kill me.'

Gunter sighed. 'Oh well, easy come, easy go,' he said. 'I'm going to take a bit of a financial knock, but that can't be helped.'

Jonny shook his head. 'No, boss,' he said. 'I didn't tell you the worst of it.'

'There's more?'

'For sure. The last thing I heard, just before I cut the connection was Charlie telling them who hired us. He was screaming out your name. Over and over and over.'

Gunter blanched in fear. 'Oh, crap.' He picked up his cell.

'Boss, I need a doctor,' mumbled Jonny.

'Shut up,' commanded Gunter. 'I need to make this call.'

'Who you phoning?'

'Not your concern,' snapped Gunter. 'But you know the expression, between a rock and a hard place?'

'Yes.'

'That's where I am right now. I've got to explain to someone why I haven't carried out their instructions. And I have a feeling that the consequences might even be worse than the Chainsaw coming for me.'

'Sorry, boss.'

'You and me both, Jonny. You and me both.'

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CHAPTER 36

‘More Russians,’ said Muller.

‘So,’ responded Tag. ‘A lot of the slave trade coming out of Europe is Russian controlled.’

‘True,’ agreed the Knight. ‘But this is getting beyond coincidence. I’m telling you; something is up with the Russians.’

‘Gentlemen,’ said Emily. ‘Not to put too fine a point on it, but what the hell? We’ve just fought two of the meanest, badest…’

‘Butt ugliest,’ interjected Tag.

‘Yes,’ agreed Em. ‘Butt ugliest vampires I have ever seen. Or even heard of. Russians, not Russians, who cares? Before I killed the big one, he told me there were many more like him. And that is not good, not good at all. It took everything we had to put those two down, imagine another twenty. Or fifty, or a hundred.’

Muller frowned. ‘It matters, Emily. In fact, even more so, because those bad boys we just came up against were Russian. As far as I can deduce, it looks like the Russian *Nosferatu* are looking to expand. Or ally themselves with the French, and most likely the rest of the European brethren. Except, as I said before, that makes no sense. It’s like throwing a viper in amongst a pit full of other snakes and asking them to get along. It will never happen.’

‘And yet you say it is happening,’ Emily pointed out.

Muller grimaced, his face set in an expression of worry. ‘Yes,’ he admitted. ‘And I tell you, it scares me. We need to find out what the hell is going on. And quickly before we’re inundated with hordes of those ugly super-vampires.’

‘And don’t forget, we gotta shut down the rest of Smirnov’s operation,’ added Tag. ‘Who knows how many innocents are being held by his operatives? And time’s running short before they all become vampire takeout.’

Emily sighed. ‘I’m worried,’ she admitted. ‘I can feel things are starting to kick off. Something is bubbling under and it could easily spiral out of control. I think we need help.’

‘I agree,’ concurred Muller. ‘But who? The church can only help so much. The new Pope refuses to acknowledge the vampire threat. As it is, I am almost acting unilaterally and without proper support. To push it any further would be counterproductive.’

Emily turned to Troy. ‘We need you to summon the packs,’ she said.

Troy shook his head.

‘Troy, my darling,’ continued Emily. ‘They are the only ones who can help. Muller is correct, if we don’t nip this thing in the bud we could be overwhelmed by those ugly super-vamps.’

‘No,’ said the Omega wolf. ‘Last time we gathered the packs they were almost destroyed. Out of over thirty wolves only seven survived.’

‘It is war,’ interjected Muller. ‘It’s what we do. People, wolves, our friends die. It’s a sad and terrible truth, but it is what we have chosen.’

Troy shook his head. ‘That is true for us. For you, me, Tag, Emily. We chose this path. But as Omega, if I call on the pack, they have to obey. There is no choice. I command, they do. It is as simple as that. I can’t have their lives on my conscience, their blood on my soul.’

‘What if you gave them, a choice?’ asked Emily.

Troy scoffed. ‘What choice is there if you know what your Omega actually wants? They will still simply obey. I call, they come, they die. No, I will not do it. Not yet at any rate. Not while there may still be alternatives.’

No one spoke for a while as they let the tension dissipate a little.

Troy lit a cigarette and blew smoke rings towards the ceiling. Muller took out a knife and started to sharpen it with a small whetstone.

Eventually, Tag spoke. ‘What about Merlin? Can’t we call him?’

‘How?’ asked Emily. ‘He just disappeared after the big battle. Him and the Prof. And it’s not like he has a cell. Hell, for all we know he’s not even in this world, or even on the same plane of existence.’

‘There must be a way,’ insisted Tag. ‘Just concentrate on him. Maybe he’ll hear.’

‘He’s not a god, Tag,’ snapped Emily. ‘He’s close, I’ll give you that, but he’s not omnipotent.’

Tag was about to answer when instead he frowned.

‘It means all-powerful. All seeing. Godlike,’ explained Troy. ‘The word, omnipotent.’

‘I know that,’ said Tag. Then he shrugged. ‘Sort of. Not really, thanks. I actually thought it had something to do with needing Viagra.’

‘No, that’s impotent,’ corrected Troy.

Emily grinned. ‘Easy mistake.’

‘What about the gargoyles,’ continued the big man, refusing to give up. ‘Can’t you ask them? Maybe they’ve seen Merlin, or maybe they know something, anything that could help us track him down.’

A look of guilt flashed across Emily’s face. ‘It’s been almost a year,’ she replied. ‘And I haven’t tried to contact any of them. Not Coldstone, Limerock, none of them.’

‘They’ll understand,’ said Tag. ‘After all, what is a year to those rocky mothers’? Like a day to us. Give it a go.’

Emily composed herself, emptying her mind, relaxing. Not quite

meditation, but not far off. Then she pulsed out her call. Seeking the gargoyles. A worldwide shout out.

A jumble of sound and vision came back. A busted television, or an old CB radio with a broken transistor. Snippets of sound, half pictures. Static. Feelings of loss.

The wave of meaningless feedback was overwhelming and she felt an immediate migraine start to pound her head. As she stopped concentrating, a voice echoed in her mind. A mere echo of an echo. So faint as to be almost a figment of her imagination.

A voice full of untold torment and pain and fear and sorrow.

And hate.

'Emily Hawk? Is that you?'

Her eyes opened wide and the blood drained from her face. Then the voice was gone.

'What?' asked Troy concernedly. 'Are you okay? What happened?'

'I… nothing. Just noise. Except, at the end. Someone. Or something spoke. I think.'

'Merlin?' asked Tag.

Emily shook her head.

'Who?'

'I think,' answered Emily. 'It was, the Morrigan.'

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CHAPTER 37

Gunter had never been so terrified in his life. In fact, the entire concept of terror had been rewired in his brain.

Not fear.

Fear was such a weak word.

Terror. With a generous helping of horror on the side.

Mind numbing, bowel loosening, mind wiping terror.

Because there are certain things the human mind struggles to process. And hideously deformed undead creatures of the night are most definitely amongst those things.

Up until that evening, Gunter had been unaware of the exact origins and background of his major client. One, Jebe Zurgadai. And if anyone had told him, well, his response would most likely have been – *pull the other one.*

After he phoned Jebe and told him of the disastrous failed attempt at obtaining the artifact, Jebe told him it was unacceptable. Then he informed Gunter he would be dispatching a team of his own to come and sort the problem out.

Gunter had been both pleased and scared. On the one hand, he was getting some extra protection against the Chainsaw, but on the other hand, a team of quite obviously dubious characters were coming to his patch.

The words *frying pan* and *fire* came to mind.

The next evening the team arrived.

And the terror came with it.

The head of the team, or the Adept in charge, as he was called, went by the name of Oblonsky. That was it. No first name.

And he…it…was the most horrendous thing Gunter had ever seen or imagined. His lumpen, deformed and broken visage was such that it would have given Stephen King a heart attack. But his horror inducing appearance wasn't even the worst of it.

No. The worst was his eyes. And the waves of dread that emanated from him like heat off a coal stove. The hatred and horror were so thick it seemed to coat Gunter's very soul. Filling him with dread and revulsion and terror all at the same time.

He was ashamed to admit that he had actually soiled himself when the monster first entered the room and cast his baleful glare at him.

With Oblonsky came five others. One more misshapen one and four humans. And after they arrived, and Gunter had been allowed to clean

himself up, they had changed his life.

Now he knew the monsters under the bed were real. Vampires, werewolves, fae and demons. Gunter's world had come crashing down around him and his hold on sanity had become a tenuous thing. In fact, oddly, the only thing keeping him going was his terror. It was like a battery to his heart. A constant flood of adrenaline.

Plus, somewhere in the back of his mind, he was hoping to wake up and discover the whole thing had just been a nightmare of epic proportions.

But that was never going to happen.

Now he found himself, at midnight, standing outside *Die Kettensage's* palatial mansion. The place looked like a cross between modern brutalist architecture and a maximum-security prison. All poured concrete, high walls and large plate glass windows.

Teams of guards patrolled the roof, the garden and the walls. Access was limited to a single entrance with a wrought iron gate. To the side, built into the wall, a guardhouse. The fact that Charlie's squad had managed to breach the perimeter before they got caught was testament to their professionalism. Unfortunately, they simply weren't professional enough and had paid the ultimate price for their failure.

And now Gunter was going in, with Oblonsky and the second vampire whose name he didn't know, and two of the human mercenary types. The humans were dressed in full black combat gear and carried enough ordnance to start a war. Which was, ostensibly, what they were about to do.

Gunter felt sick with terror. The odds were simply too far against them. How could five men…well, three men and two – things? – hope to get into this fortress and live? Let alone steal the object and egress without being killed.

Impossible.

The vampire squad got out of the vehicle and Oblonsky beckoned to Gunter to follow.

Gunter did so on unsteady legs. He had no idea why he had to be part of the team. After all, he wasn't any sort of wet work specialist. He was basically a researcher, a facilitator. A manager who liked to call himself a detective.

But Oblonsky had insisted. He maintained that as it was Gunter's failure he had to be there when others cleaned up his mess for him.

The detective was convinced this was a suicide mission. However, he was committed and, at the very least, death would bring an end to this new found constant feeling of overwhelming terror.

The team approached the gates, Oblonsky in the lead. Gunter had no idea how the vampire monster thought they were going to get in. it was sure to be a simple case of the gate guards refusing entry. and

that would be that.

They stopped at the gate and one of the guards exited the guardhouse and approached. As he saw Oblonsky, he did a classic double take, recoiling from the horror that stood in front of him.

But before the guard could react further, Oblobnsky held his hand up and spoke in a low commanding voice.

'Open the gates. If your compatriot argues, subdue him with all necessary force.'

Oh great, thought Gunter. Not only are these things terrifyingly ugly, they are also insane with delusions of grandeur. Does he really think the guard is simply going to follow his instructions?

But to his amazement, the guard did exactly that. With a look of shock etched on his face, he turned and lurched back to the guardhouse on stiff legs. Like a badly controlled puppet.

Gunter heard a muted argument. Then a single shot rang out and the gate rumbled open.

The vamp squad walked in.

As they did so, the guard lurched back out of the guardhouse and stood before Oblonsky, his pistol still in his right hand.

The vampire monster nodded his acknowledgment of the man's presence.

'Well done,' he told him. 'I have no further use for you. Take your firearm and shoot yourself in the face.'

Gunter watched as the guard struggled to resist whatever it was the vampire monster was doing to him. A sweat broke out and tears rolled down his cheeks, but slowly, he raised his pistol with trembling arm, pointed it at his own eye and pulled the trigger.

Oblonsky smiled. A truly dreadful sight to behold. There had been no real reason for him to glamor the guard into committing suicide. He could have just knocked him out, or glamoured him into going back to the guardhouse and sitting there for a few hours. But this was much more amusing. Almost hilariously so. Making someone shoot themselves in the eye.

Tres droll.

However, it was nothing compared to what he was going to do to the cowardly, pant-soiling so-called detective when this was over.

They strolled down the driveway; the lamps dotted along the sweeping entrance lighting them intermittently as they walked between the pools of light. The detective noticed that whenever the two vampires were in the shadows, they disappeared from sight. Ghostly apparitions as opposed to solid flesh.

Gunter saw guards on the roof rushing to cover them, rifles pointed in their direction. The two human mercenaries took a knee and brought their rifles to bear. There was a flurry of shots and the rooftop

guards pinwheeled backwards as the devastatingly accurate fire slammed into them.

The two vampire monsters continued walking as calmly as if they were strolling down an office corridor. Gunter scuttled behind them, his shoulders hunched, his rectum puckering up in anticipation of being shot.

The front door opened and a crowd of armed guards sprinted out. Gunter fell to the floor, but Oblonsky leaned down, grabbed him by the collar, hauled him up and dragged him towards the door.

The mercenaries peppered the guards with well-aimed suppressing fire, keeping their heads down.

And then the second vampire. The one whose name Gunter did not know, blurred into motion, covering the twenty yards between him and the guards almost instantaneously.

The resulting carnage was like someone had thrown a body into a woodchipper. Never had Gunter seen such wanton violence. The vampires didn't just kill – they maimed and dismembered and tore asunder. And they laughed while they did so. After it was all over, they lapped at the pooled blood like dogs.

Gunter gagged and then threw up.

That was merely the beginning.

By the time they had cleared the mansion, Gunter had nothing left in his stomach.

And sitting opposite him, staring up at the two monster vampires, was Hamburg's most notorious criminal.

Die Kettensage.

Gunter had to admit, the gangster showed no signs of fear. Not even a flicker, despite the fact that two of the most terrifying beings he had ever seen were staring at him the way a dog stares at a portion of prime rib.

'*Du widerlich hässliches tier*,' sneered the Chainsaw.

Oblonsky smiled. 'You call me an ugly animal?' then he shrugged, massively muscled shoulders shifting like tectonic plates. 'Actually, you may be correct. I am undeniably ugly. An animal? Maybe that as well. But at least I am not about to die in the most horrifically painful way imaginable.'

And for the first time an expression of unease wavered across the Chainsaw's face.

'We have come for The *Triginta Argenteous,'* stated Oblonsky.

The Chainsaw looked puzzled. 'I don't know what that is,' he snapped. 'And even if I did, I wouldn't tell you. In fact…'

Before he could continue, Oblonsky blurred forward and casually ripped the Chainsaw's ring finger off his right hand. But he didn't stop there. He continued, like he was plucking a bouquet for a loved one.

Two, three, four fingers and a thumb joined the first digit.

The gangster gaped at his ruined appendage and then he opened his mouth as wide as he could – and screamed.

Oblonsky backhanded him, smashing his teeth out and splitting his lips. Then he casually plucked off his ears and dropped them on the floor to join his fingers.

The second vampire chuckled softly. The scene was amusing, but not so amusing as to warrant full blown laughter.

'I swear,' sobbed the Chainsaw through his ruined mouth, his bluster and bravado now non-existent. 'I don't know what you are talking about.'

'I believe you,' responded Oblonsky. 'So now I shall explain. A necklace, made up of a series of silver Roman Denarias circa 33AD.'

'Yes, yes,' slobbered the gangster. 'In my saferoom. I have it.'

'The code to get into the room,' said Oblonsky.

'It's my birth date.'

Oblonsky flicked the gangster on the nose, the seemingly ineffectual gesture shattered his nose and almost ripped it from his face, the severed flesh and cartilage hanging obscenely from his cheek.

This time the second vampire burst out laughing.

Oblonsky grinned at him.

'Is very funny,' said the second vamp in a strong Russian accent. 'Like Picasso painting. You are true artist.'

'How the hell would I know what your birth date is, you worthless piece of *dermo*?'

'08111962' blubbed the Chainsaw.

Oblonsky turned to Gunter. 'Do you know where the saferoom is?'

Gunter nodded. 'I have studied the blueprints. It's on the floor above.'

'Right,' the monster grabbed The Chainsaw by his hair and picked him up. 'Lead us there. Let us see if this rubbish is telling the truth.'

They stopped outside the saferoom. Oblonsky punched the code into the keypad at the side of the door. There was a hiss of hydraulics and the massive steel door swung open.

'It is in there?' he asked the gangster.

'Yes. Please don't hurt me anymore.'

'Just a little,' replied the monster.

And he tilted the man's head to one side, exposing his neck. Then, with a shrill cry of glee, he bit down, ravening and sucking on the gangster's life's blood.

Finally, after he had his fill, he dropped the broken corpse to the floor and strode into the room, blood and gore dripping from his lips and teeth.

'Where is it?' he asked Gunter.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Find it. Now.’

Gunter staggered around the room, checking the various exhibits. Eventually he stopped next to a glass case, studied the object for a few seconds and then opened the case and held up the item.

‘Here,’ he said. ‘I think this is it.’

Oblonsky walked over.

Gunter was holding up a silver necklace. Hanging from it was a single Roman Denaria.

‘Where is the rest of it?’ asked Oblonsky. ‘There are meant to be thirty pieces.’

Gunter shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ he admitted. ‘Maybe it’s been split up. Maybe this isn’t it. After all, I didn’t have a lot of information to go on. This is the best I could do.’

Oblonsky took the pendant from the detective. He looked closely at it. There was no denying – it was an object of serious power. He could feel the waves of influence coming off it like heat from a blast furnace.

‘This is part of it,’ he announced. ‘I can feel its presence.’

‘So, I have done well,’ ventured Gunter, unable to keep the obvious relief from his voice.

Oblonsky shook his head, causing the tumors and wattles of flesh to shiver and bounce. ‘No,’ he said. ‘We tasked you with finding the entire thing. Not one thirtieth of it.’

He grasped Gunter’s face in his huge right hand and slowly, ever so slowly, squeezed.

Until, with an audible pop, the detective’s brains exploded out of his ears.

And this time the second vampire could hardly contain his mirth.

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CHAPTER 38

The hunters decided to drive to the town of Sonne just outside of Genoa where one of Smirnov's holding houses were situated. They could have flown, but as the drive was only around nine hours, Emily figured by the time they had chartered a plane, booked in, driven to the airport and then organized transport after landing, it was simpler to just take the Globetrotter Motorhome with its armor, run flat tires and fully stocked gunroom.

'It can't have been the Morrigan,' said Troy. 'Merlin and the Prof exiled her.'

Muller snorted. 'Is that what you call it? They imprisoned her in some sort of eternal dungeon, forcing her to relive her most dreaded thoughts and memories over and over for all eternity.'

'Whatever,' said Troy. 'Harsh, but she deserved it. My point is, it couldn't have been her.'

'It was,' responded Emily. 'Not sure how, or why, but it was her.'

'Don't worry none, baby girl,' said Tag, speaking from the driver's seat. 'Ain't nothing we can do about it, so put it on the backburner for now. Let's concentrate on the things we got some control over. Like making these people-butchers regret they ever lived.'

Emily nodded.

They stopped at a service station to fill up with diesel and to have a sit-down lunch.

Em marveled at the food on offer in what was ostensibly a roadside gas station. The French would never stoop to serving fast food and stale sandwiches. Instead, they perused a small menu that included dishes like *Duck al orange*, *Bouef Bourguignon*, *moules mariniere* and *cassolette*.

Tag frowned at the menu like it was personally trying to offend him. Finally, he asked. 'Don't they just do a burger? With cheese? And fries?'

'Have the *Bouef Bourguignon,'* said Emily.

'Want a burger.'

'It's beef stew,' continued Emily. 'We can all have it.'

Tag raised an eyebrow. 'I like stew.'

'Cool.' Emily ordered for all of them, speaking in fluent French.

The waiter returned quickly with four steaming bowls of stew, a large carafe of water, glasses and a basket of bread.

The *Bourguignon* was spectacular.

Four hours later they were driving through the outskirts of Genoa, following Emily's directions to a hotel she had booked earlier that day.

'We'll freshen up and then do a recce on the slave place,' she said when they arrived and booked in.

The rest of the team mumbled their agreement.

'I hope this place serves French stew,' added Tag. 'It's my new favorite meal.'

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CHAPTER 39

Jebe had never seen the Blood King so angry. Usually, he was the very soul of measured response. But for some reason, the item Oblonsky handed over had driven Belikov into an apoplectic rage.

Maksim Sidorov, the vampire who had accompanied Oblonsky to Hamburg went down on one knee. ‘My king,’ he said, head held low. ‘At least this is a start. A beginning. We have the first part of the *Triginta*.’

Both Jebe and Oblonsky took a few steps back, physically divorcing themselves from the kneeling Adept, expressions of absolute disbelief on their faces. Incredulous that a mere Adept had dared to even speak uninvited in front of the *Tsar*.

But Sidorov knew what he was doing. And he knew the risk he was taking. But he was a vampire with ambition. He strove to gain influence in the house, and he knew the only way to do so was to bring himself to the King’s attention. To make himself as invaluable as possible.

‘If I might dare, Great King,’ continued Sidorov. ‘Place me in charge of finding the treasure. I will bend myself entirely to doing so. No stone shall be left unturned and nothing will stand in my way. This I swear.’

Belikov stopped mid rant and stared at the kneeling vamp. Then he smiled. ‘You hear that, Jebe?’ he asked. ‘A follower with some balls. Keen to show his worth to his King.’

Jebe said nothing. He had known Belikov for many hundreds of years and had seen him in this frame of mind before. The best thing to do was nothing. Be still. Don’t move. And most importantly, do not speak unless told to.

The monster King stroked Sidorov’s head, running his hand over the vampire’s growths and tumors. A loving father.

‘So,’ he said softly. ‘You would like to be in charge?’

The Adept nodded.

‘Instead of Jebe? The brother I have known and trusted for a thousand years. What do you think, Jebe?’ Belikov addressed his second in command. ‘Is this member of my house ready to lead.’

Jebe still didn’t answer. The decades had long schooled him as to when the Blood King was asking a question rhetorically or literally.

Sidorov, however, had not had his years of experience and, as a result, decided to make an impact. ‘I assure you, my King,’ he said. ‘I

am ready.'

Belikov's hand had not left Sidorov's head yet as the Blood King continued to pet him like a faithful dog. Then, in a blur of motion, the Blood King dropped his hand and forced his fingers into the kneeling vampire's mouth, smashing his front teeth as he did so.

Then, with a savage jerk, he pushed down, tearing Sidorov's bottom jaw off his face. The Adept shrieked wordlessly, the sound coming out more high-pitched gurgle than scream, due to the lack of lower mandibles.

Belikov's knee came up hard and fast, connecting with the ruined remains of Sidorov's face with enough force to shatter the rest of the bones in his skull. Then the King picked him up and threw him towards Jebe.

'Finish this arrogant piece of crap,' he commanded.

Jebe grabbed the mewling vampire by the back of his skull, wrapped another hand around his neck, and with a shrug of his shoulders, plucked the remains of his head off like he was picking a ripe strawberry.

Oblonsky did his best to hide his smirk. This was truly amusing, but he knew better than to look like he may be laughing at the Blood King. So, he quickly changed his smirk into a sneer aimed at the broken corpse of the former Adept with aspirations.

Belikov turned, walked over to his desk, sat down and picked up the necklace. Then he gestured towards Jebe. 'Sit, friend. And you, Oblonsky, wipe that smirk off your ugly face and clean this place up.'

Oblonsky bowed deeply and saw to removing the body and fetching a familiar to mop up the pools of blood.

'What do you think of this?' asked Belikov as he pushed the necklace across the desk to his friend.

Jebe picked it up and studied it closely. 'It has power,' he answered. 'Immense power. I have no doubt it is a part of the *Triginta*. However, finding it raises more questions than answers. Where are the rest of the coins? How does it work? Can we progress with just this one coin?'

'Good questions all,' admitted Belikov. 'Who do we have that possess knowledge about arcane items? And I'm not talking about those idiots we have working on the problem at the moment. All of those minds, all of those years of experience, and together they have unearthed almost nothing of value.'

'The Ancient, *Faylsuf* Ali Hadad,' answered Jebe instantly.

'Ah, yes. The Arab professor.'

Jebe smiled. 'Philosopher, actually, my King. That is what the *Faylsuf* indicates. And to be honest, he prefers to be referred to as a Thamudian, not an Arab.'

‘Frankly, I don’t care.’

‘Nor should you, my King,’ concurred Jebe. ‘But he is a crusty old scholar and, dare I say, shows little respect where it is due. Also, he has no fear. Literally, I believe the condition is known as Urbach-Wiether syndrome. So, threats do little to motivate him. He is purely driven by his thirst for knowledge. And blood, of course.

‘The only reason I have not used him yet is, honestly, because he is so difficult to deal with. I suspect he is more than a little insane.’

‘Summon him.’

‘As you command, my Tsar.’

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CHAPTER 40

The target building was very similar to the one the hunters had hit before. It seemed that Smirnov had expanded his people trafficking business like a MacDonald's, keeping each holding warehouse and layout the same. Fast food for vampires.

A quick recce showed this urban prison was almost empty. Troy reported he could smell five guards but no prisoners.

Emily cussed under her breath.

'Hey, that's good there's no prisoners here,' said Tag.

'Maybe,' answered Emily. 'But it could also mean we just missed them. Maybe they sent them off to the vamps yesterday. We should have hit the place as soon as we arrived.'

Troy shook his head. 'No,' he stated. 'The residual smells are days old. The last time they held anyone here was most likely four days ago. Nothing we could have done would have made any difference.'

Em didn't say anything, but they could see by the set of her shoulders, she was a little happier that their inadvertent tardiness had not resulted in the death of the very people they were trying to save.

'Five of them,' said Emily. 'Okay, guys, don't kill them. Not straight away at any rate. We need to question them. The more we can find out about this setup the better. We need to cleanse this organization from the face of the earth. I want no building, no vehicle, no personnel left. No way for anyone else to restart the operation. I know that Smirnov answered all we asked him, but as we know, information is power, and you can never have too much of it. So, interrogate, then kill.'

The rest of the team nodded.

They didn't get fancy. In fact, they didn't have a plan beyond, kick the front door down, walk in, grab occupants, question them.

'Split up,' said Emily as Tag breached the front door. 'As soon as you have subdued anyone you come across, bring them back here to the entrance lobby. Go.'

Troy went left, Muller went right, and Tag and Emily strode deeper into the building. As soon as they reached the next point of divergence, Emily sent Tag off on his own.

A couple of shots rang out, followed by the dull thump of fists striking human flesh.

One scream cut short.

Emily smiled and then proceeded to her chosen target.

Ten minutes later she stood in the entrance once again, sitting at her feet, a large man sporting two black eyes and a bleeding lip.

Then Troy appeared with two unconscious guards, one slung over each shoulder. He dumped them unceremoniously at Emily's feet, next to her prisoner.

Muller arrived next, dragging his captive by the hair. The man squealed at every step the Knight took. Muller cuffed him on the head and slung him next to the other three.

A few seconds later, Tag entered. He was dragging his captive by his arm.

Emily took one look at the captive's misshapen face and knew straight away there was no chance he was still alive.

'Tag,' she snapped. 'I thought I said, alive.'

The big man looked down at the body and assumed an expression of over-the-top surprise. 'Oh no,' he exclaimed. 'How did that happen?'

Emily bent down and took a closer look at the dead man's face.

'Tag, you hit him so hard you crushed his skull. Then it looks like you tried to squish it back into shape so we wouldn't notice.'

The big man scuffed his feet and looked away.

Emily put her hands on her hips.

'Okay,' said Tag. 'My bad. He took a shot at me and so I had to explain nicely to him that it was rude, and the next thing he was all, like, sort of head caved in. Maybe his skull has some sort of defect. Brittle bone disease or something.'

Both Troy and Muller set their faces, struggling not to laugh at the big man's discomfort.

Emily sighed. 'Oh well, I suppose four out of five isn't that bad.'

Tag smiled, happy that he was no longer in trouble.

Emily grabbed the captive closest to her by the neck and held him up. 'Right,' she said, her eyes glowing red. 'Question time.'

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CHAPTER 41

As they drove off, the sound of fire engine sirens got closer.

Muller called the fire department a few minutes after Tag had dropped a batch of thermite grenades into the warehouse. As was their usual *modus operandi*, they set fire to the building with the bodies inside.

'Man, I thought those dudes would never stop talking,' said Tag. 'Girly, you got a way with threats. Hell, one even started to give you his first-grade teacher's name and number.'

Emily frowned. She hated questioning people. Even though they were undeniably the scum of the earth, it felt too close to bullying. Let alone the fact they usually ended up dead.

But that was her calling. Death and retribution. Shadowhunters protected the innocent from the evils they didn't even know existed. And that left no room for her personal feelings.

No parades and medals and public approbation for her and her team.

Just battle, and loss and the knowledge that you were doing good.

The darkness welled up inside her once again, threatening to overwhelm her humanity with its need for power. It's dreams of control. It whispered to her always, even in her sleep.

You could be queen. They are but sheep. They need a leader.

They are below you.

They are worthless.

You are all powerful.

Troy put his arm around her and pulled her towards him, enveloping her with his muscular arms, his warmth, his scent.

His inherent goodness and caring.

He kissed her softly and, for a while again, everything was alright. She was not alone.

Muller was driving, and as he followed the Satnav directions on his cell, he wondered if the next step was one too far. Emily had gotten each guard's home address out of them and now they were proceeding to the closest residence. The young Shadowhunter had commanded they search it and then destroy it. Muller had argued that burning the houses down would expose them to the unnecessary risk of butting heads with local law enforcement. Also, innocents could be harmed if the fires got out of control. There could be collateral damage.

But Emily had not concurred. They would alert the fire departments

in a timely fashion, she said. And the law would never find them. Not with the skills of evasion the team possessed.

Muller had agreed. But it bothered him. He knew this was total war. But burning down houses did not sit well with him. It smacked of mere destruction more than retribution. Wanton vandalism as opposed to punishment.

But he was part of the team. And the rest of the team agreed, so he would comply.

The directions took them to a middle-class neighborhood. Well maintained houses. Late model sedans. Children's bicycles outside some front doors.

Muller pulled up outside their destination. The house looked the same as all of the others, bar the fact it was a little less well groomed. The small front lawn needed a trim. The flower beds needed weeding and a coat of paint would not have gone amiss.

There were no signs of life.

'No need for us all to go in,' said Em. 'Tag, you and Troy take a look. Check if there's a study or a desk with any interesting papers in it. Bank details would be good. If he's been paid via bank transfer, then we can check if Smirnov actually did spill all regarding his bank accounts. Then we'll see about draining them so no one else can benefit from his ill begotten gains. After that, place a couple of thermite grenades and we'll call the fire department. They'll get here in time to contain the blaze so the house will be a write off, but the neighbors will be okay.'

'You got it,' responded Tag. 'What if we find anyone in the house? You know, maid, partner?'

Emily hesitated before she answered. 'Umm – look, if they attack you, respond in kind. If not, disable them and bring them out. Dump them on the front lawn far enough away so they're safe.'

Both Troy and Tag nodded.

Muller took a deep breath, but said nothing. This was the sort of situation that could lead to inadvertent collateral damage, and it made him uncomfortable. The risk did not equal the reward as far as he was concerned.

A mere twenty minutes later, Tag and Troy returned.

Muller phoned the fire department and gave them the address, reporting there was a fire, then he drove off, heading to the next residence.

'That was quick,' said Emily.

Troy shrugged. 'Not much of interest. Looked like he hardly stayed there. Barely anything in the fridge, no crockery, no pictures or photos. Definitely no study or desk. So, we torched the place and came straight out.'

‘There was this,’ added Tag. Putting a cell and an address book down on the table between the chairs.

‘Maybe he used Apple Pay on his cell,’ said Emily. ‘If he’s like most people, he’ll have his passwords in the address book. I’ll take a look, see if I can get into his bank through that.’

‘You can hack stuff?’ asked Tag.

Emily grinned and tapped the side of her head. ‘I think so. Remember, I retain everything I’ve ever read or seen. Everything. I’ve just got to give it a go, and if the knowledge is there, it’ll surface.’

‘Awesome,’ said the big man.

Troy scoffed. ‘Not so much,’ her said. ‘You ever try to argue with someone who remembers every word you ever said? Verbatim.’

‘Can’t say that I have,’ admitted Tag.

‘I don’t recommend it,’ advised Troy.

‘We’re here,’ stated Muller as he pulled the vehicle to the side of the road.

Another middle-class suburb. The houses and gardens slightly larger. More trees.

‘That’s the house,’ said the Knight, pointing at a white, stucco bungalow.

‘Right, Muller, you and Tag take this one,’ commanded Emily.

Muller nodded and he and the big man debussed and strode towards the front door.

‘What the hell is he doing?’ snapped Em. ‘I told them to recce first, not to simply walk up and knock on the door like some traveling salesman.’

‘Hey, it’s Muller, he marches to the beat of his own drum,’ said Troy. ‘Anyway, there’s nothing to worry about, no normal human being could harm him and Tag. They’re a force of nature.’

‘That’s not the point,’ said Em. ‘I told them what to do and they simply ignored me.’

Troy frowned but said nothing, he could tell that Emily was freaking out over the whole people trafficking thing. And rightly so, it was a heinous crime that needed to be stopped. But he couldn’t help but feel she might be pushing things a bit too far with her current scorched earth policy.

He watched as Muller knocked on the front door. The door opened and Troy could see the Knight conversing with someone. Then he nodded, the door shut and he and Tag walked back to the vehicle and got back in.

‘What was that all about?’ asked Emily.

‘That was the gangster’s wife,’ answered Muller. ‘And his kid. Young boy, maybe six or seven.’

‘And?’

‘And there is no way I’m going to burn their house down.’

There was an uncomfortable silence for a few seconds and then Emily spoke.

‘Thank you, Muller,’ she said softly. ‘You’re right, of course.’ The young Shadowhunter paused, collecting her thoughts. ‘You know, before, when we were all last together, we had Merlin, and William to lead us. Now, for some reason, I seem to have become the leader. Not sure how that happened, to be honest. So, what I’m trying to say is, maybe you should take the reins. Or Troy, after all he is the Omega.’

‘What about me?’ asked Tag.

‘Or you,’ conceded Emily.

Tag chuckled. ‘No way, baby girl,’ he said. ‘Just pulling your leg. Tag doesn’t want to lead anyone. I be the strong silent type, not the tell-you-what-to-do type. Tall dark and handsome, that’s my remit. Anyway, if we voting, you get my vote.’

‘Me too,’ echoed Troy.

They all turned to face Muller.

The Knight spun the ignition and revved the engine to life before he spoke. ‘You lead,’ he said. ‘I will follow. But do not ask me to do anything my church would not agree with. And that includes making innocent people homeless.’

‘Okay,’ conceded Emily. ‘I shall rely on you to be my conscience.’

‘No,’ replied Muller. ‘You must be your own conscience, control your own morality. But I will always be here to guide, to lean on and to listen. Deal?’

‘Deal.’ Concurred Emily.

‘That’s my man,’ said Tag. ‘Muller the Pious. Knight extraordinaire. Hi five, holy man.’

Muller didn’t even take his eyes off the road. ‘No.’

Tag chuckled. ‘Fair enough, you drive, I’ll high five myself.’

‘Where to now?’ asked Muller.

‘Hotel,’ replied Emily. ‘As those ass wipes told us, they got places at Lyon and outside of Paris we need to shut down. I say we pick up our baggage and drive through the night. I don’t want to take the chance of them shipping any prisoners out before we get there. Particularly as by now I’m sure they know that Smirnov is no more.’

All murmured their agreement.

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CHAPTER 42

‘*Faylsuf* Ali Hadad,’ said Belikov. ‘Now you are here, I recall. We have met before.’

‘On numerous occasions, Blood King,’ confirmed the philosopher. ‘But it was long ago, before the … umm … Chernobyl event. Obviously, I look a little different now, since the meltdown.’

‘But your aura remains the same,’ noted the Blood King. ‘Where was it, the Holy City?’

‘And after, when I was traveling with the Knights Templar. But I have been living in your residence for many years now. We simply have not run into each other.’

‘Ah yes, I remember it all well,’ affirmed Belikov. ‘The infamous Arab who fought for the infidels.’

‘Thamudian, not Arab.’

‘Whatever.’

‘No, *Krov Tsar*, not whatever, how would you like it if I referred to you as a Caucasian?’

‘I would think nothing of it, because you wouldn’t dare to refer to a pure-bred Russian as *Chernozhopy*.’

‘But if I did?’

‘Enough,’ roared Belikov. ‘I will call you whatever I want. Learn your place, Arab.’

Hadad turned and walked away, heading for the door.

‘Halt this instant,’ commanded the King.

‘Certainly not,’ replied the philosopher. ‘Find someone else to insult. But if you are looking for an intellect that even approaches mine, well, good luck with that, Blood King.’

Belikov glanced at Jebe and gestured with a mere nod of his head.

Jebe flashed across the room and dragged the philosopher back to stand before his king.

The two monster vampires stared at each other. The philosopher and the king.

‘Are you always this obtuse, Thamudian?’ asked Belikov.

Hadad gave the king’s question some serious thought. As always, he never answered without applying himself fully to the question in hand. Finally, he nodded. ‘Yes, my king,’ he said. ‘I believe so.’

Belikov stared for a while and then a rumble started in his chest and, after a few seconds, rang out across the room. ‘So be it,’ he said through his laughter. ‘You are now my official advisor, second only to

myself and Jebe. Sit down, my Thamudian philosopher, I have some questions for you.'

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CHAPTER 43

The team drove through the night, taking turns to sleep while they traveled. The trip took just under eight hours and they arrived on the outskirts of Lyon as the sun was rising.

Unlike the others, Emily had not slept at all. Instead, she spent the night working on hacking into Smirnov's bank accounts using the minimal information she had available to her.

Fortunately, her sky-high IQ plus her eidetic memory allowed her to achieve in a mere six hours what most people would take weeks to do.

'You spend all night looking at that screen?' asked Troy as he lit a morning cigarette.

Em smiled and nodded.

'How did it go?'

'Victory,' she said with a chuckle. 'I haven't managed to track down and clean out everything, but I'm pretty sure I've hit his bigger accounts and drained them. Over three million dollars. I'll see the money goes to the victims and their families. It's not much, but it's a start.

'Whatever happens, I reckon we can safely say Smirnov's evil enterprise will not last much longer without leadership or funds.'

'Yeah,' agreed Tag. 'Or without anyone alive to staff it.'

'The thing that is still bothering me,' said Muller from the driver's seat. 'Is how one supplier got together with all of the different *Nosferatu* houses. And a Russian one at that. It smacks of cooperation and that's bad.'

'Look, Muller,' replied Emily. 'You're right. We have to look into this whole Russian conspiracy theory of yours, and we will. As soon as we've wrapped up Smirnov's operation.'

'It's all connected,' interjected the Knight. 'Smirnov, the Russian *Nosferatu*, those pig-ugly monster vamps we fought. I'm telling you, Emily, I'm not simply raving, I'm really nervous. This is the harbinger of serious things to come. Earth shattering, world ending stuff. I can feel it in my bones.'

No one spoke for a while as Muller's dire predictions sunk in. They had all spoken about it before, but the Knight's obvious concern was getting to them.

'Anyway,' added Muller. 'We're here. Plan of action, boss.'

Em frowned, not sure if Muller was joshing her or not by calling her, boss. 'Same old,' she answered. 'Tag and you take the front; Troy

and I will take the back. Keep some alive, check for prisoners. You know the drill.'

'And hope none of those ugly dudes are in residence,' added Tag.

'Amen to that,' concurred Muller as he got out of the vehicle.

A mere twenty minutes later the team met in the lobby at the front of the warehouse. It is not possible for an attack on a group of armed people to become mundane, as danger always lurks in the most unexpected places, but in so much as it could, the process had become rather pedestrian.

The five miscreants knelt in a row in front of Emily. Although, to be fair, one of them had to be leaned against the wall lest he fall over.

Tag stood next to Emily, a beaming smile on his face.

'Hey, check it out,' he said as he gestured at the almost unconscious captive. 'Punched the dude, knocked him out – and didn't kill him.'

Emily rolled her eyes. 'Well done, Tag,' she said. After all, praise deserved should be praise given.

But as she spoke, the man in question threw up and then fell sideways, his entire body shaking and twitching as he began to fit. Seconds later, his back arched and, with a final grunt, he went slack.

Troy knelt next to him and laid a finger in his neck. Then he shook his head. 'He's gone.'

'Not my fault,' said Tag. 'You all saw. He was fine until a few seconds ago. Must be some genetic thing. I've heard of this before. SDS. Sudden Death Syndrome. Dudes just expire for no apparent reason. Just my luck,' he continued. 'The one I bring in is an SDS sufferer. Oh well, never mind, still got a whole bunch left.'

The four surviving captives stared at the big man like he was barking mad, the looks of fear on the faces blatantly apparent.

'Please,' stammered the one. 'Who are you? I don't understand what we've done wrong?'

'Seriously?' asked Emily. 'How about kidnapping innocent people and selling them to vampires as food? That do for a start?'

The man looked at Emily as if she had gone insane.

'Vampires? WTF? There's no such thing.'

Emily sighed. Then she leaned forward and let the Daywalker out. Her canines lengthened, her eyes glowed bright red and a wave of power pulsed over the captives like a tsunami of terror.

One of the captives passed out, two started to scream and the one talking to Emily began to shake like he had been in a freezer for a few hours.

'We didn't know,' he said, his voice a whining plea for clemency.

'What did you think you were kidnapping them for?' asked Emily.

The man shrugged. 'I dunno. Hookers? Sex slaves? Not food.'

'Oh, sex slaves, so that makes it alright, does it?'

The man stared. He knew that any answer he gave would most likely lead to pain. So, he decided to stay silent.

Emily shook her head. Then she turned to Muller. ‘I can’t stay in the room with this scum,’ she said. ‘Lest I kill them all before we question them. Can you do it?’

The Knight nodded,

‘Thank you,’ said Emily as she left the room, reverting to her fully human form as she did.

Troy started to follow her but she shook her head. ‘I need a bit of time alone,’ she said. ‘If that’s okay with you.’

Troy nodded and stood back.

As Emily left the building her super-hearing picked up the sound of bone meeting flesh. A solid, wet thud.

Then she heard Muller sigh. ‘Tag, come on, why did you just smash that guy’s head in?’

‘Because he upset the girly,’ rumbled Tag. ‘Don’t fret, holy man, you still got three more.’

Emily smiled. She knew she shouldn’t. Smashing someone brains out with your bare fist wasn’t actually something to grin about, but sometimes Tag’s obvious care for her made her happy, no matter how heavy handed it was.

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CHAPTER 44

Hadad was in his element, surrounded by ancient tomes, computer on his desk, unrestricted access to anyone he wanted to talk to and unlimited funds.

Truth be told, before the Blood King had approached him about the *Triginta Argenteous*, the thousand-year-old philosopher had been bored. He loved knowledge, hungered after it, but after ten centuries, he found little that still excited him.

The story of Judas Iscariot had always fascinated Hadad. He couldn't think of a more spectacular fall from grace in the lexicons of history. To have been chosen above so many, offered the keys to a kingdom, and then to betray all for what would translate to less than $1000 in today's money.

Modern theories dictate that Iscariot then tried to return the blood money, and when the gesture was refused, he flung the money into the temple and went off to hang himself.

Hadad knew this wasn't the complete truth. In fact, he did attempt to return the money, but when it was refused, he did not try to hang himself. Instead, he simply left. And according to many of the reports Hadad could find, Judas clung onto his silver. Like a talisman. Even in his most destitute moments he never spent it. It was all he had to remind him of his Lord, and of what he had done.

He never forgave himself.

But what he discovered over time was that the Thirty Pieces of silver had been imbued with a power. He found he had traded his humanity for more than simple metal. The coins themselves had been imbued with the power of the Disciples. They called out for followers.

At first, he thought he had been forgiven. Blessed with the powers of leadership. Destined to have a band of followers.

And then he found it was quite the opposite. Because, although he attracted cohorts, they were always the very worst of people.

Like attracts like.

He could make no friends with anyone who had even the slightest good in them.

Only the vile. The evil. The corrupt and the venal.

He was being mocked. Belittled.

And over time his remorse turned to hatred.

Hadad tracked Judas's progress across Europe, citing ancient tomes combined with rumor and even a couple of eye witness accounts. The

journey the Great Betrayer had taken was most interesting. Notably the change from remorseful ex-disciple, to callous thief and murderer.

He continued to roam, unable to put roots down anywhere as he was plagued constantly by hatred and mistrust, no matter what he did.

After many years he met an ancient vampire Master, Augustus Sextus. An ex-*Tribunus* in the Roman army. They became friends, as the vampire was the first being Iscariot had met since his downfall that approached his own level of evil.

The Master willingly turned the Great Betrayer into a *Nosferatu*, hoping for a true friend and ally.

However, once again Iscariot's base nature combined with the Power of the *Triginta* came to the fore, and instead of following Sextus, Judas slayed him. Removing his head and stealing all he could carry.

Again, he disappeared for many years only to surface during the Germanic tribal wars.

It was here where the Great Betrayer finally had his miserable life ended. Killed in a scuffle by a minor chieftain, Euric son of Theodoric.

Euric relieved Judas of his thirty pieces of silver, and was so enamored by the silver coins that he had them fashioned into a necklace.

He wore it constantly from that day forward.

The power of the *Triginta* helped Euric unite the Visigoth hordes, become king, crush the Romans and go on to control most of Europe.

Until, in short time, the curse of the *Triginta* showed itself and Euric died a painful death by 'Natural Causes'. Taken to his grave by a series of flesh rotting tumors.

And after that, Hadad could find no more trace of the *Triginta*.

Had it been buried with the king? If so, how did one piece of it end up in a German gangster's private collection? Where was the rest of it?

The logical place to start looking would be the grave of King Euric. The only problem being, no one knew exactly where the grave was. Most likely somewhere in, or near, Toulouse. Not quite a needle in a haystack, but very close. And Hadad couldn't do any field work. Apart from the fact he could only venture out at night, he was hideously deformed from the radiation poisoning, so there was no way he could pass himself off as anything but what he was.

A monster.

Instead, he knew exactly who, or what, he could call on. If the truculent, self-absorbed SOB would deign to help. Which was unlikely.

Nevertheless, Hadad had to try.

First, he had to make contact. For this he needed a stone bowl, two pints of fresh human blood, and a mirror made from polished brass.

Getting up out of his chair he rifled through one of his chests and, after a minute, pulled out a stone bowl. A short while later he found the brass mirror.

Then he rang a bell.

Within moments a familiar knocked and entered.

The philosopher handed him the bowl.

'Get this filled to the brim with fresh blood,' he commanded. 'It matters not whom it comes from, use any of the food. Hurry.'

The familiar bowed and scuttled off.

Less than an hour later, Hadad placed the bowl on his desk and propped the mirror behind it at such an angle it reflected the surface of the blood. Then he sprinkled a pinch of dried herbs into the bowl, muttered an arcane chant and waited.

The spell was powerful, but it took a while to work.

The evening moved on. However, Hadad did not. In order for the scrying bowl to connect, he needed to continually feed a dribble of power into it. So, it needed his constant attention.

It would have been much easier if he could have simply used a cell to make contact. But that would never work. The problem with cellular communication is that it is unable to connect with the Fae world. Different continents are fine, but different planes of existence – not so much.

Because the being Hadad was attempting to contact was none other than Arend Redwurm.

And Arend was a *Hulder*.

Modern vernacular had changed how people now referred to his race, and frivolous fantasy fiction had further corrupted both his people's history and their perceived demeanor.

Nowadays, Arend would be referred to as an Elf. And visions of Legolas and Lord of the Rings would spring to mind.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Although, to be fair, some of the modern perceptions and beliefs held water.

Hulders were incredibly long-lived. They *were* graceful, tall and seemingly emotionless. They also happened to be exceptional warriors.

But they were not fair of hair and skin. Nor were they pinup, heart throb pretty.

Their features were uncomfortably angular and their skin was closer to blue-gray than Hitler youth. Eyes were like polished coals in their head. Two orbs of shiny obsidian. Although mere humans would be unable to see their true visage unless the *Hulder* wanted it so. Instead, they would see what they wanted to see. A tall, attractive human being. Such was the natural power of the *Hulder's* glamor.

And there were no similes that came close to describing the depth of

their absolute narcissism. Not for nothing was there a popular saying amongst the Fae, reserved for only the most arrogant and self-absorbed beings. They were said to be showing, “The Hubris of a *Hulder*”.

A crackle of energy rippled across the bloody surface and a scowling face appeared in the brass mirror.

‘What?’

‘Greetings, Arend Redwurm,’ said Hadad. ‘I hope I find you well.’

‘Get to the point, scholar,’ snapped the *Hulder*. ‘Time is precious, even for those of us who are gifted with a seeming excess of it.’

‘I have a challenge for you,’ continued Hadad, knowing the worse thing to do would be to voice his request as a favor.

‘You mean you need my help,’ corrected Arend. ‘Come on, spit it out.’

Hadad contrived to look bored, as if he had already lost interest in involving the Elf. ‘Well, we’re looking for a certain artifact. Something that involves fieldwork, but if you aren’t interested, I can always ask Doctor Cornelius.’

Arend spat over his shoulder in disgust. ‘That useless Boggart. That idiot fairy isn’t fit to research my skinny *Huldish* ass.’

‘Not true,’ argued Hadad. ‘He’s considered to be an expert in the field.’

‘What field? What are you looking for?’

The philosopher vampire paused, drawing out his answer. Eventually he sighed, as if it would do him no harm to tell. ‘The *Triginta Argenteous*. The Blood King is looking for it. Well, to be exact, he is looking for the rest of it. We already have part of the artifact.’

‘You say you have part of it already?’ questioned Arend.

Hadad nodded.

‘So, it isn’t a myth after all.’ The Hulder frowned. ‘The fabled thirty pieces of silver. Why do you want it?’

‘Irrelevant,’ answered Hadad. ‘Though, what is relevant is what we are prepared to pay for it.’

‘I am already wealthy beyond my wildest dreams of avarice,’ snapped Arend. ‘Do not insult me with tawdry offers of profit.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it,’ countered Hadad. ‘However, what do you know of the Codex du Clos Luca?’

Arend scoffed. ‘I know it doesn’t exist. It was destroyed in a fire in 1512.’

Hadad, who had been prepared for this moment, picked up a leather bound linen paged book and held it in front of the mirror. ‘It seems the rumors of its destruction were a trifle exaggerated.’

Arend did a classic double take. ‘Is that real?’

‘As real as the Rock of Gibraltar.’

‘The full notebooks of Leonardo de Vinci,’ breathed the Hulder. ‘Where did you find it?’

‘Does that matter?’

‘No. What would I have to do to see it?’

‘If you find the rest of the *Triginta*, the Codex is yours,’ offered Hadad.

Tell me what you already know,’ said Arend. ‘I will commit all of my considerable resources to finding your *Triginta*.’

‘Contact me when you have it, and the Codex is yours,’ affirmed Hadad.

Arend nodded and broke contact, already keen to start his journey of exploration. Driven by his greed and need for one of the most converted of books amongst those who strive for knowledge above all else.

Hadad smiled. A job well done.

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CHAPTER 45

‘What do you mean, they are dead?’ snapped Belikov.

‘Leonid Lebedev and his second, Karl.’ Repeated Jebe. ‘They have both suffered the true death. And their bodies have been immolated.’

‘Impossible.’

Jebe stood still. He didn’t answer, because to point out that it patently was possible, as it had just happened, would be an exercise in both futility and stupidity. Unless of course he wanted to join the two dispatched brethren.

‘How did it happen?’ asked Belikov.

‘As you know, my King, I sent the two of them, along with a team of familiars, to protect Smirnov. He claimed that some unknown force was destroying his operation.’

‘Belikov waved his hand at Jebe, a gesture that meant, get on with it.

‘Long story short, they didn’t report back and I was unable to communicate with them. So, after a couple of days, I sent a team of local familiars to investigate. Smirnov’s villa was burned to the ground. There were no survivors. Not only that, but two more of his operations have been torched, all of the employees with them. To all intents and purposes, Smirnov’s operation no longer exists.’

Neither monster spoke for a while. Belikov deep in thought, Jebe simply waiting.

‘I cannot think of any living being besides one of our own House that could defeat both Leonid and Karl in battle,’ mused Belikov. ‘It would take a company of soldiers, and if a war that size had been waged in a residential area, it would have made the international news.’

Still Jebe refrained from offering thought. He knew if his King wanted him to speak, he would command it.

‘Thoughts,’ demanded the Tsar.

‘What about the rumors?’ ventured the second.

Belikov snorted. ‘They are just that. Rumors. The possibility of a Daywalker is zero to less than.’

‘Yet someone wiped out the United Kingdom and the Italian Houses in one fell swoop,’ said Jebe.

‘Infighting followed by werewolves. The pack took advantage of the change in power that came about when they started to bicker amongst themselves. When I rule all, pettiness like that shall never happen

again. We weaken ourselves by fighting each other like stone aged tribesmen.'

Jebe wondered whether it was worth risking the King's ire and decided it was. After all, he was meant to be Belikov's advisor and only friend.

'There were many corroborated reports, my King,' he insisted. 'Not only of the Daywalker, but also of the Shadowhunter who became a *Nosferatu,* thereby betraying his friends. It was he who tore the houses apart. It is also said that the pack Omega was killed and a new one has risen in his place.'

Belikov breathed heavily for a few seconds. Jebe knew he was doing so to show his displeasure at his second's disagreement. Because neither of them actually had to breathe. They were, after all, undead.

Jebe waited, looking at a spot above his master's head. Avoiding eye contact.

Finally, Belikov spoke. 'I am lucky to have you at my side, friend,' he said softly. 'What you say is true. And it is right to point it out. I deny the existence of the Daywalker because, for the first time in many, many centuries, I feel a twinge of … fear.'

'They say she is a mere child,' interjected Jebe. 'A slip of a girl.'

'Yet she bested two powerful Houses,' said Belikov.

'She had help.'

'Yes. She did. But if what you suspect is true, she also brought the true death to two of our most respected warriors. Trust me, Jebe, slip of a girl or not, she demands respect. And a healthy dose of fear.' The King chuckled. A dark and sinister sound. 'I like it,' he said. 'It gives one's existence a little spice. What say you, my friend?'

Jeve allowed himself a smile. 'I say, my King has no cause to fear anyone.'

Belikov laughed out loud. 'As always, my friend, you are the consummate diplomat. Whatever, put some people on to tracking these rumors down. I want to know if she exists, where she is and exactly how powerful she is. Then I want her destroyed.'

'You command, my Lord, and so it shall be.'

Jebe bowed and left the room.

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CHAPTER 46

It was done. The team of hunters had rooted out every one of Smirnov's setups and destroyed them. Apart from the first raid, they found no more prisoners. But now they knew there would be no further victims. At least not via that particular avenue.

They had also struck a serious blow against the *Nosferatu.* Almost thirty brethren subjected to the true death. Not forgetting those two monsters. The Russian mega-vamps. Or as Tag now referred to them as – the BUMFS (Butt Ugly Mother … whatever).

Emily booked the team into another five-star Parisian hotel and she retired to Troy's and her room after dinner.

Troy went for a shower and she stood alone on the balcony, staring at the Eiffel Tower, taking in the scents of the city and marveling at the beauty of the French architecture.

Far in the distance she could see the dome of the Notre Dame Cathedral. Her exceptional eyesight allowed her to pick up the multitude of stone Gargoyles. There were over a hundred statues, not all of them gargoyles. Strictly speaking, to be classed as a gargoyle, water had to be channeled through the statue. Otherwise, it was a grotesque. However, for Emily's intents the word gargoyle sufficed. Particularly as that is what they referred to themselves as.

On a whim, she stretched out her senses and opened her mind to communication. Trying once more to communicate with the gargoyles. A rush of random sounds and feelings flooded her senses.

The slow, grinding vibration of Gargoyle communication provided a bass note to the mental cacophony. Over it a babble of French. Human voices.

Then suddenly, without warning, a spike of pain.

Emily dropped to her knees as the pain hammered into her. And with it a voice echoed in her mind.

Spiteful. Malevolent and vindictive.

'*Got you.*'

Emily knew the voice well. She knew now that she had been correct before.

It was the Morrigan.

'Freedom,' she crowed. 'Now I have an anchor to cling to, I can finally get out of this godforsaken prison of insanity that Merlin has banished me to.'

Emily could feel the presence of the warrior women's mind tugging

at her. Wrapping itself around her and using her as a pillar on which to pull itself from the foreign plane of existence she was trapped in.

Emily fought back, but she was human. An incredibly enhanced one, to be sure, but still a mere mortal.

And the Morrigan was a god.

Try as she might, Emily could feel the stays of her sanity start to tear free as the Morrigan used the Shadowhunter's mind to enhance her own desperate bid for freedom.

And as Emily felt she had lost the battle, a pure white light appeared in her consciousness. Warm, calming and all powerful.

'Begone, foul woman,' thundered a voice.

Sound and color exploded and Emily found herself floating in a foreverness of blue calm. A warm ocean that supported her in its powerful, welcoming arms. She opened her eyes to find herself lying on her back, still on the balcony.

Above her a familiar face. Long, gray beard. Silver hair, tied back. And violet eyes that spoke of unbelievable authority and wisdom in equal volumes.

'Merlin,' she gasped.

'And in the nick of time it seems,' responded the ancient sorcerer as he picked her up and hugged her close.

Emily glanced over his shoulder to see Troy standing next to the Professor. Both had similar concerned expressions on their faces. The major difference being that Troy was naked and still wet from running out of his shower when he heard Emily cry out.

'It looks like we need to all sit down so you can tell me what the hell is going on,' said Merlin. 'Are any of the others with you?'

'Tag and Muller,' answered Emily. 'In the hotel.'

Merlin nodded in approval. 'Good,' he turned to Troy. 'Be a good fellow, don some clothing and then go and fetch them, won't you. It's time to caucus.'

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CHAPTER 47

Merlin leaned back in his chair, took out his pipe and filled it from a small leather tobacco pouch.

The Professor did the same.

'You should have called me sooner,' said the wizard.

Emily frowned. 'I tried. It's not like I have you on speed dial. You don't even have a cell.'

Merlin raised an eyebrow. 'So instead, you decided it would be a good idea to ask the gargoyles if they could contact me, and you sent out a worldwide distress call set to open all channels?'

'Hey, I'm still new at this,' argued Emily.

'Next time, my child,' said Merlin. 'Simply concentrate on me. Me alone, and call. I will always come. Now,' he continued. 'The way I see it is – we have a load of problems. Let's start at the bottom and work our way up. You have a gang of kidnappers selling innocents to the *Nosferatu* for food. That you appear to have pretty much cleared up. Well done.

'Secondly, you have declared war against the French and Italian houses. Not altogether a bad thing, after all, it is our job to fight these blood suckers.

'Next, the Russian connection. These monster vampires you have come up against. I know who they are, and let me tell you, this is a big problem. They are part of the House of Belikov. A house of brethren that were affected by the Chernobyl meltdown back in 1986. They have crossed my radar but I never bothered about them because, due to their massive and horrifying deformities, they tended to remain rather reclusive. However, it looks as if the Blood King has developed ambitions above his station. And this is bad. Very bad. By the sounds of things, it appears that Belikov is looking to expand his house and connect with the other European houses. If he does this, we are in big trouble.'

'Won't happen,' interjected the Prof.

'Why?' asked Emily.

'Cats and dogs,' answered the Boggart.

'Meaning?'

'The houses will never unite. Vampires are incredibly territorial. One of the main reasons they have never taken over the world is because they fight like cats and dogs. They are genetically indisposed to forming an alliance.'

‘True,’ agreed Merlin. ‘But you cannot deny this looks like Belikov is trying to do so.’

The Prof frowned. ‘Very much so,’ he admitted. ‘And that in itself is a worry. Especially coming from a vampire as ancient as Belikov. He of all creatures should know it would be impossible to unite the houses. Unless, of course, we are missing something. I shall have to look into this. Yes. Definitely. This is disturbing. I don’t like it. No, not at all.’

The Prof harrumphed, stood up and began to pace about the room, talking to himself as he walked.

‘Finally,’ said Merlin with a puff on his pipe. ‘The awakening of the Morrigan.’

‘Hey, that wasn’t my fault,’ said Emily.

‘No, it wasn’t,’ concurred Merlin. ‘It was mine. When the Professor and I banished her, I misjudged her power. And her resilience. We can assume that she may have broken free of the plane of imprisonment we trapped her in. Or that at least she might be close.’

The Prof stopped his pacing and pointed his pipe at Merlin. ‘Tell them,’ he said.

Merlin frowned. ‘Later.’

‘No,’ insisted the Prof. ‘Tell them now. They need to know.’

‘What are you two talking about?’ asked Muller. ‘Sounds like something we should know. The Prof is right, information is strength.’

Merlin sighed. ‘When we imprisoned the Morrigan, we … well, it was more than a simple banishment. We looked to punish her for the monstrous things she had done.’ Merlin hesitated.

‘We all know that. Well, perhaps not exactly how you caried out said punishment, but we know the gist,’ said Emily.

‘Yes,’ breathed the wizard. ‘Okay, well, when we locked her away, we did so in a pocket universe. And she was not alone, as such.’

‘Meaning?’ asked Emily.

‘We locked her away with her own nightmares,’ explained Merlin. ‘With her every fear, her regrets, her failures. Every terrible incident that had ever occurred in her life. And you must remember, the Morrigan is a god. She has been around for countless millennia and has experienced more pain and misery and heartache than a hundred thousand humans put together. Her suffering while locked away must have been – infinite.’

‘What the wizard is trying to say,’ interjected the Professor. ‘Is that our goddess of war might very well have gone completely and utterly insane whilst locked in stasis. Mental.’

‘And she will be looking for revenge,’ added Merlin. ‘Particularly against Emily who, for some reason, she saw as playing a huge part on her downfall.’

‘Hey, that crow-lady comes anywhere near the girly, she and Missus Jones are going to have a dance,’ said Tag. ‘No one harms Emily.’

Troy growled his agreement.

Merlin raised an eyebrow. ‘Yes, of course. But let us not forget, the Morrigan is a god. And the god of war, no less. Do not take this lightly.’

‘So, what do we do next?’ asked Emily.

‘We wait,’ answered the Prof. ‘Until I find out a little more about Belikov and his newfound ambitions. And while Merlin attempts to track down the Morrigan. After all, she may still be entrapped. But even if that is the case, it is no simple task tracking down a folded pocket universe. Particularly if one is looking to keep it secure.’

‘Quite,’ said Merlin. ‘But first, we all get some sleep. Troy, could you phone down to reception and book a pair of rooms for the Professor and I?’

The Omega nodded and walked over to the bedside phone.

Emily went over to Merlin and hugged him again. ‘It’s good to have you back,’ she said.

And the old man smiled.

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CHAPTER 48

The air shimmered as a rectangular, door sized light manifested itself in the middle of an empty field. Small arcs of lightning crackled and earthed from the sides of the light, sending up puffs of smoke that caused patches of grass to catch fire.

Then the shimmering coalesced, forming a bright blue, solid panel. Through the panel appeared an arm, then a body followed. Another came after. And another.

When the third body had fully crossed the threshold, the portal winked shut, leaving a burned patch of grass and an overwhelming stink of ozone in the air.

Arend took in a deep breath and smiled. ‘I love the smell of ozone in the morning,’ he announced. ‘Welcome to the realm of the humans,’ he continued as he turned to his two companions.

The two beings with him were also *Hulder*. Tall, willowy, grey skinned and sharp featured. One male and one female. Like Arend, they were dressed in fitted leather pants and jackets. They both carried large canvas rucksacks.

Concealed in various sheaths and holsters beneath their jackets were a variety of weapons. Daggers, throwing blades, poisoned darts and even small, spring driven crossbows.

Obviously, all of the blades were obsidian and the metal parts of the weapons were bronze. Steel was an anathema to the Fae.

Arends compatriots, the female, Mist and the male, Remer, were visiting the human realm for the first time. Usually Arend traveled alone, but this time he felt he needed backup. After all, the prize was such that he was bending all to achieve his end goal.

He would find the *Triginta*.

And then the Codex would be his.

The two Fae newcomers looked about, taking in the fields, the trees and the buildings that designated the outskirts of the city of Toulouse in the distance.

Using her farsight, Mist zeroed in on the city. ‘Why are their buildings so large?’ she asked. ‘And so ugly? All squares and sharp angles.’

Arend laughed. ‘They are a callow race,’ he explained. ‘Brutal and warlike. But do not judge too soon. They are also capable of creating items of great beauty. And their scholars are second to none. Despite the fact that they are incredibly short lived, they still manage to

accumulate vast oceans of knowledge. Actually, perhaps it is because their lives are so brief they are driven so much more than their Fae counterparts.'

'Is there an inn close by?' asked Remer. 'Or at very least a stable where we can purchase some stout horses?'

Arend grinned, exposing his pointed, yellow teeth. 'I have my own abode near to here,' he replied. 'A short walk. Follow me.'

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CHAPTER 49

Both Mist and Remer were bathed in sweat. And their normal blue-gray skin had turned an unhealthy shade of pink.

'Do not fret,' said Arend. 'The runes will take effect soon. Already they are protecting you, just give them another hour or so and you will both feel absolutely fine.'

Mist fingered the crystal that hung from a brass chain around her neck. The surface of the crystal was covered in tiny carved inscriptions. Runes of power.

Arend had provided each of them with the said runed necklaces as they had set off from the portal to get to his abode. They matched one that Arend himself wore around his neck at all times.

'So much iron,' she mumbled, her voice scratchy from nausea. 'It's hideous.'

Arend grinned. The discomfort of his compatriots was highly amusing. 'Rookies,' he thought to himself. 'Complete and utter noobs.'

There were a few reasons he hadn't told them of the preponderance of iron in the human world before they agreed to accompany him. Firstly, they might have refused to come and, secondly, he thought they both needed taking down a peg. Even amongst the *Hulder*, Mist and Remer were considered arrogant. And to be fair, they were entitled to a little conceit. Both were amongst the leading Fae warriors, deadly with bow, blade and empty hand.

But now they were unsettled. And this gave Arend the upper hand. It was typical of him to plan ahead, using every situation to his own advantage. That is how he became one of the wealthiest, most respected scholars in the whole of Faedom. His name was both revered and despised, as it should be. For he was respected and feared in equal measure.

Remer stood up from his chair and, on unsteady legs, rushed to the front door, opened it and threw up violently as his stomach roiled against the vast mass of iron all around him.

Arend took out a long, small bowled clay pipe, filled it with Fae tobacco and, using a small fire spell, lit up. He sat back in his chair and puffed contentedly, the purple smoke rising in the form of perfect smoke rings above his head.

An hour later, he stood up.

'Right,' he said. 'Time's up. The runes will have taken full effect by now. We can move on.'

‘I feel like death,’ mumbled Remer.

‘Mere weakness brought on by the nausea,’ said Arend. ‘Drink some water. Both of you, quickly now, then come with me.’

The two ill *Hulder* followed his instructions and followed him to the garage.

‘Stables?’ asked Mist.

‘In a manner of speaking,’ replied Arend as he pushed the remote, bringing the garage door up to reveal a late model Range Rover in metallic black.

Both of the compatriots stared open eyed.

‘Where are the horses?’ asked Mist.

Arend thumped the hood. ‘Under here.’ Then he opened the passenger door, and one of the rear doors. ‘Mist, you get in the front. Remer, back.’

The two *Hulder* looked at the steel skinned vehicle in dismay.

‘It’s an iron box,’ stammered Remer in horror. ‘We will literally be surrounded by the foul metal.’

Arend pointed at their charmed necklaces. ‘Runed against harm,’ he said. ‘Now get in.’

He opened the driver’s door and climbed in, settling himself into the calf-leather seat and putting the keys in the ignition.

He glanced at the two noobs and was pleased to see they had both screwed their courage to the sticking post and, with eyes almost closed from fear, they clambered in, sat down and closed the doors.

Arend turned the ignition. The huge engine rumbled to life and he pulled out of the garage.

Remer let out an involuntary squeak of fear and Mist simply squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

Putting his foot down, Arend gunned the engine and sped towards Toulouse. At the same time, he turned on the radio and opened the Classical channel. Tchaikovsky’s 1812 overture boomed out, complete with cannons.

Both compatriots froze. And Arend had to use all of his power to stop himself hooting with laughter.

However, after a few minutes, the two *Hulder* warriors showed their mettle and pulled themselves together.

‘Magic?’ questioned Remer.

‘Internal combustion engine,’ answered Arend.

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Obviously. It doesn’t matter. It is a physical phenomenon. The humans, on the whole, do not possess magic. They are blind to it.’

‘It does not exist here?’

‘It does,’ answered Arend. ‘But only a select few are capable of using it. The rest are blocked by their own narrow minds.’

‘And what is this horseless carriage called?’ asked Mist.

‘It’s a motor vehicle,’ answered Arend. ‘And if you want to blend in here, you are going to have to watch how you talk. No, magic. That and no talking about horseless this and foul iron such what. Tone it down.

‘Also, you need to project a glamor. Humans are a rather skittish breed and they do not take well to others that are different to them. Pay attention now, here is how you will need to appear.’

Arend willed an image of a six foot four, blonde, well-built GQ magazine model to appear in his mind. Then he set it free to settle around his physical being, like a second skin.

‘Get it?’ he asked the two.

They nodded.

‘Do it, let me see.’

A few seconds later Arend was looking at two identical copies of his own glamor.

‘Idiots,’ he sighed. ‘Not exactly the same as me. Obviously. Make your own versions. And, Mist, yours should be female.’

Shaking his head, Arend took a cellphone from his pocket and, dividing his attention between the road and the screen, pulled up some images of ramp models, both male and female. He handed the phone to Mist. ‘There, use those images to form your own simulacrums.’

A few seconds later the Range Rover contained three perfect, blonde and almost impossible beautiful humans.

If the *Hulder* really wanted to blend in they would have assumed more average countenances. But their natural hubris and arrogance meant they could only conceive of assuming what they considered to be the most beautiful and desirable of forms. Anything else would be below them.

So, they now looked decidedly human. Albeit in a Nazi pinup poster kind of way.

But they did not blend in. In fact, quite the opposite.

Arend knew this. But he didn’t care. Far be it for him to assume aught but the most superior of simulacrums. He was, after all, *Hulder*.

Nodding in satisfaction he explained their next moves.

An hour later the three of them walked slowly through the rooms of the Museum de Toulouse. The huge, natural history museum situated in the center of the city. The group attracted much surreptitious attention as they moved from room to room. Appreciative glances from both men and women.

Using one of the free maps you picked up at the entrance, Arend led them to a specific display. In a glass case, laid out with accompanying plaques and explanations, was a full set of armor and weapons alleged

to have been owned and worn by none other than King Euric.

Lamellar armor, a short sword, leather trousers. A selection of bracelets, greaves and rings.

Arend lay his hand on the glass case and concentrated, pushing his senses into the display. After a few seconds he nodded.

'The ring and the sword,' he said. 'The rest is not Euric's. In fact, the armor is almost a hundred years too late.' He glanced around the room, noting the old security guard and the other patrons. Then, with a casual flick of his wrist, he smashed the glass case and removed the ring and the sword.

The guard started from his state of semi-reverie and shouted out.

'Take care of him,' commanded Arend as he walked back towards the entrance.

Mist raised her hand and projected a bolt of lightning at the guard, striking him in the chest and killing him instantly.

'Idiot,' snapped Arend. 'Not like that. I told you, no magic. Next time, use your fists. Moron. Come on, we need to move.'

And with that, the trio left the museum, ran to the vehicle and headed back to Arend's abode.

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CHAPTER 50

Jebe took his king's command seriously. As such, he put together a top team to find and destroy the Daywalker.

Five members. Two of the deadliest Chernobyl brethren and three familiars. Each familiar was ex Spetsnaz Russian special forces. All three had been dishonorably discharged for crimes against humanity. This for a unit that famously practiced its killing methods on live prisoners.

And the vampires had many centuries of fighting experience between them.

But Jebe knew, if the Daywalker turned out to actually exist, then he needed the most vicious and deadliest of warriors to take her down.

The familiars were kitted out with the very best equipment including state of the art lightweight nanotech body armor, custom made modern versions of the De Lisle carbine, a semi-auto submachine gun that was almost completely suppressed. Almost as quiet as Hollywood movies would have you believe guns can sound. Added to this, a variety of bladed weapons, garrotes and small grenades.

The vampires, both just below Master level, carried no weapons. Obviously, they had no need to.

As well as the two vampires and the three humans, Jebe had, after much careful contemplation, added a Grinder to the team. A Grinder was a version of a vampire that had survived the turning process, but during the change their brains had been fried. Irreparably damaged by the virus that changed a human into a *Nosferatu*.

They ended up with the strength, speed and healing traits of the full vampire, but their intellect was little higher than a five-year-old child. A completely psychotic, ultra-violent five-year-old child with an insatiable hunger for human blood and a lust for battle.

Usually, Jebe would never have considered attaching a Grinder to a precision attack team. At best, the damaged brethren were used for large scale battles, house security, or sometimes they were set against each other in gladiatorial battles for the higher vampire's amusements.

But this Grinder was different. And unlike others of his kind he had even been gifted with a name. The brethren called him, Iscat. Russian for *The Seeker*.

Because this particular Grinder had gained an uncanny ability to

track both smells and personal auras over vast distances, even after many days or even weeks had passed. Unfortunately, Iscat came with his own set of problems. He would have to be muzzled at all times and kept on a collar and lead. Basically, treated like a rabid dog. But in return he would give the team every opportunity of finding the Daywalker.

If she did indeed exist.

'You will proceed to the address I have given you. It is on the outskirts of Paris,' commanded Jebe. 'There you will find the burned out remains of a villa. It was owned by Pytor Smirnov.'

'The food guy?' asked Yelena.

She was the senior vampire on the team. Once she had been beyond beautiful, but in a cruel twist of fate, she was now one of the most hideously deformed of the Chernobyl victims. Tumors shaped like Shitake mushrooms covered her face, leaving only room for her mouth and eyes. Slabs of muscle looked like they had been applied by a poor plasterer, mounded on like raw concrete. Her strength and speed were off the chart, even amongst the monster vampires from house Belikov.

But because the gods have a cruel sense of humor, her voice had remained the same as before. A light, girlish, breathy tenor. A voice that brought with it visions of summer days and light cotton frocks and the smell of fresh cut grass. As opposed to the living nightmare from which it now issued.

Jebe nodded. 'The food guy. Yes. Along with the villa, Smirnov, his detachment of guards plus Leonid and Karl and their entire team were burned to the ground as well.'

'That must have been some firefight,' noted Igor, the second in charge. 'Hundreds must have been involved. I'm surprised it isn't international news.'

Jebe raised an eyebrow, an expression that was difficult to see through the ridges of scar tissue and lumpen nodules of flesh. 'There was no firefight,' he said. 'We believe the entire host was taken out by a small team. Perhaps two or three. Maybe even by a single protagonist.'

There was a rumble of disbelief amongst the team, but one look from Yelena and it ceased immediately.

Jebe waited for the team to settle. Then he dropped the bombshell on them. 'We think it may have been, the Daywalker. We also suspect that she may have teamed up with the new Omega, the one who replaced the last one after he died in the United Kingdom battle. This is all extrapolation, but regard it as truth. Be prepared.'

This time, even Yelena could not stop the team from breaking into discussion and statements of incredulity.

Again, Jebe waited for them to calm down. 'Questions?'

No one asked anything. There was no real point. If it was true, it was true. If it wasn't, well, then it wasn't. No use gainsaying or second guessing. It was time to travel to France and get some concrete evidence.

Finally, Yelena spoke.

'How soon can we leave.'

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CHAPTER 51

Crystals have power.

Not in the tree hugging, airy-fairy way that some proponents of the latest New Age religion would have you believe. No, crystals channel power. Not wishful thinking or positive vibrations. Actual magical power. Runic and thaumic energy.

Spells cast through the correct crystals will be both distilled and augmented. They are like an amplifier for a public address system.

But if you don't know magic, well, then they are simply shiny bits of rock.

Arend did know magic. Loads of powerful, reality altering amounts of magic. For he was *Hulder* and he was centuries old, and he was a kick ass mage of note.

The *Hulder* trio were currently traveling through the countryside outside of Toulouse. Arend drove, Remer sat in the back and Mist rode shotgun. But instead of a weapon, she held a seven-inch-long rod of Topaz, around twice the thickness of her thumb. The crystal rod had been cut and polished so it reflected every tiny bit of light and refracted it back in an orgiastic display of color. If one looked closely one could see the delicate runes cut into the surface. Hundreds of them. And one would also note that the crystal vibrated slightly, thrumming with latent power.

But this was not the power of destruction, this crystal was laden with the power of the hunt.

The *Hulder* called it a Seeker Wand.

It was currently seeking the grave of King Euric.

Well, to be completely accurate, it was actually tracking down anything that was part of the king or had been in his possession for any length of time. But Arend was confident it would lead them to the final resting place of the king. He had charged the wand using the items they had stolen from the museum. Like you give a bloodhound an item of a person's clothing so they can track them down.

'Left,' instructed Mist.

Arend frowned and checked his SatNav. If he followed Mist's instructions he would have to drive across through a fence, across an open field and ford a stream. Instead, he kept going to the next turnoff.

'Left some more,' insisted the female *Hulder*.

'I know,' snapped Arend. 'I'm not grotesquely stupid. I can follow

simple directions.'

Mist frowned. 'I'm only repeating the wands prompts. No need to chew my head off.'

Arend took the next sideroad left, a mere dirt track. He slowed down and proceeded for half a mile or so.

'Right,' said Mist, pitching her voice so it appeared more a request than an instruction. Obviously attempting to lighten the atmosphere.

A minute later, she pointed at a small cottage that stood alone, next to the track. 'There.'

Arend smiled and pulled the Range Rover over. 'Let's take a closer look,' he said as he cut the ignition and got out.

The two compatriots adjusted their glamours and followed.

'Remember,' said Arend. 'No magic unless I give instruction or permission, and no dorky language.'

'Dorky language?' questioned Remer.

'You know, I've already told you. Foul metal, horseless carriage, noble steed. That sort of crap.'

Neither Mist nor Remer reacted. Mainly because they didn't actually know what he was going on about.

Arend held his hand out to Mist. 'The crystal,' he said. 'Give.'

She handed it over. Arend grasped it lightly in his right hand, stopped walking and pointed it at the ground as he turned in a slow circle. As he was dousing, a man came out of the cottage and walked towards them. He held an ancient double-barreled shotgun in his right hand and he strode towards them with a purpose in his step.

'*Puis je vous aider?*' he shouted aggressively. '*Ceci est une propriété privée.*'

Arend scowled and turned to face the irate Frenchman. Pocketing the crystal wand, he muttered an incantation, combined it with a series of small gestures and unleashed a spell. But it was not aimed at the Frenchman, it was pitched to be cast on the trio of *Hulder*.

'Get off my land, intruders,' yelled the man.

Arend smiled. A universal translation spell was not an easy magic to perform, and he had just done it with ease.

Both Mist and Remer looked at him with respect. Both were low level mages, their warrior aspects being their main strengths. But they knew enough about casting to appreciate the skill involved.

'We are searching for something of importance,' said Arend. 'We won't be long.' He turned away and continued dousing with the wand, vaguely amused at how irate this strange human was.

'Don't turn your back on me,' shouted the Frenchman. 'What are you looking for? Are you from the government?'

Arend ignored the man completely and concentrated on the crystal.

The man raised his shotgun and pointed at Arend's back. 'Answer

me. This is your final warning.'

'Remer,' said Arend softly. 'This human is bothering me.'

Remer nodded, drew a small obsidian throwing blade from his jacket and launched it using a deft underarm flick.

The blade struck the Frenchman in the neck, piercing his jugular and lodging in his spine.

The man dropped his shotgun as he grasped at the shard of obsidian, the look of surprise on his face so complete it was almost comical.

'*Merde*,' he whispered. 'I have been killed by a fashion model. How humiliating.'

He pitched over, dead before he hit the ground.

Arend continued his search. After a minute, he pointed. 'There,' he said. Then he strode back to the Range Rover, opened the tailgate and took out a pick and a shovel.

He handed the tools to Remer. 'Dig there,' he instructed the two compatriots.

They stared at him in shocked silence.

'Dig?' blurted Mist. 'In the ground,' she continued. 'Like a goblin. Or a dwarf. You cannot be serious. We are pure bred *Hulder*, not dirt grubbers.'

Arend took a deep breath, then he pointed at the patch of ground once more and, in a level voice, repeated the command.

'Dig.'

And he let a ripple of raw power flow from him. An expanding bubble of force that nudged both Mist and Remer as it washed over them.

Mist grabbed the shovel. Remer took the pick.

They started digging.

Arend took out his ubiquitous clay pipe, filled it, lit up and lay back against a tree, staring at the lifeless body of the Frenchman. The rhythmic thud of the pick, counterbalanced by the slide and scrape of the shovel lulled him into a sense of peace. Contrary to the feelings of many of the *Hulder*, Arend actually liked the human world. He even liked some of the humans themselves.

They were a quaint race. Short lived but full of energy and ambition. Warlike to the point of ridiculousness. Even in the land of the Fae where most everything was decided by might of arms, there were moments of peace. But since Arend had started visiting the human plane, many hundreds of years ago, he could not remember a single period where some nation or tribe or faction was not warring against another one.

The human default setting seemed to be destruction. Truly, he mused, if you left a human alone for long enough, his one hand would

declare war on the other.

His reverie was disturbed by Remer calling out.

‘We got something.’

Arend walked over to the hole. At the bottom was something wrapped in a dirty, rotting bolt of what appeared to be linen. From the shape and size of the bundle it was obviously a body. That meant the wrapping would be a shroud. Unlike recent human history, in the time of Euric’s reign, people were not buried in wooden boxes. They were shrouded in the finest linen and laid to rest with a few of their most treasured items.

‘Remove the body,’ he instructed. ‘Carefully.’

The two compatriots lifted the body out of the grave and laid it on the grass. Using a blade, Arend cut the shroud away to reveal a desiccated corpse of a man dressed in full battle gear. Steel scaled armor, helm, rotting leather kilt, greaves and sandals. Next to him, a short Roman sword.

He waved the crystal wand over the body and it chimed with a clear ringing tone. This was most definitely King Euric. Or at least, it was when he was still alive.

But there was no sign of a necklace.

Instead, placed over the king’s eyes, were two silver coins. The payment for Charon. The ferryman.

Arend could feel the power emanating from the coins as he leaned down and picked them up.

Roman Denarias, circa 33AD.

Desperately he searched the rest of the body, tearing off the armor, shredding the linen. But they were no more coins.

He had proved correct. But he had also failed.

At least he had two more pieces of the fabled relic.

Now he needed to find the rest.

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CHAPTER 52

The Morrigan floated in a sea of darkness. There was no sound. No light. The only sensation was that of cold. And weightlessness.

She didn't panic because she had been here before.

She was 'Between'.

For the last year she had been trapped – no, not trapped, *imprisoned* – in a world of pain. A world of heartache and regret and terror and every awful thing you could imagine. And all the while, she was unable to move. Her body frozen in time her eyes glued open, her mind assailed on a constant basis.

Imprisoned by a man she once loved.

Merlin.

The magician.

But it wasn't his fault. No, he had done this terrible thing to her at someone else's behest. Well, perhaps not their direct behest, but most definitely because of his misguided sense of loyalty to them.

Emily Hawk.

Shadowhunter. Daywalker, Gargoyle whisperer. Pack member.

Emily Hawk.

The font of all of the Morrigan's pain.

Of course, the goddess of war completely discounted the fact that she had betrayed her so called lover and led his dearest friends into a situation that resulted in their deaths.

And she conveniently forgot that Merlin had once before forgiven her for another betrayal. When she turned against King Arthur, causing not only his death, but the death of an era and a kingdom.

Because the Morrigan, or Morgana as she was sometimes known, was the embodiment of war. To her nothing else mattered.

The worship of the warrior was her entire raison d'être. Her sole purpose for being.

Anything that stood in the way of her goal must be destroyed.

And at the moment, that anything was none other than Emily Hawk.

The darkness around her shifted. Ever so slightly. The tiniest glimmer of light twinkled in the distance.

'Not long now,' she said to herself.

Then she smirked. It was ironic the only reason she had managed to escape her magical incarceration was thanks to the very girl she was looking to exterminate. If Emily hadn't cast her open mind out into

the ether in an attempt to contact Merlin, then the Morrigan would not have had something to cling to.

But Emily was ignorant. Powerful beyond any other human mind the goddess had come across, but still youthful and callow. And she had no idea what risks she was taking by giving the entire universe a shout out.

The power of Emily's mind-shout was so strong it managed to pierce the veil Merlin had cast. The Morrigan had latched onto the thought like a limpet. And in doing so, it provided her with an anchor. A guiding beacon.

After that, it was a simple process of exerting her divine will and following the path of thought back to the earth's plane of existence.

Now she was close.

Another speck of light joined the first, and then another. And another.

Then, with a rush of sound and an explosion of color, the Morrigan found herself lying naked on a patch of bright green sod.

She took in a deep breath and knew instantly where she was.

The Emerald isle.

The seat of her original worshippers.

Ireland.

'*Tá mé sa bhaile*,' she cried out in Gaelic. '*Anois beidh vengence agam*.'

I am home. And now, vengeance will be mine.

All about her the land shivered in anticipation.

And fear.

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CHAPTER 53

The darkness shrouded the two vampires with merciful cloaks of shade, hiding their obscene deformities in the inky blackness of the moonless night.

To the *Nosferatu*, the stink of charcoal and burned plastic and roasted flesh still lay thick in the air, despite the fact Smirnov's mansion had been burned down almost four days ago.

The Spetsnaz familiars could pick up the lingering smell of smoke, but the minutia of the other remaining odours was lost to them.

Iscat, the Grinder, on the other hand was slavering as he sniffed at the burned-out ruins.

Yelena had placed a stout leather muzzle over the Grinder's jaw, tethered a steel chain to his neck, and clad his hands in thick leather mittens. She had also hobbled him by connecting his legs together with a short length of chain. It was long enough to enable him to take short steps, but not long enough to allow free movement of any type.

Igor held the Grinder's chain and he led him around like a dog. Punching him in the side of his head if he hesitated to obey an instruction. Every time he did so, Iscat would whimper and then snarl at him, the hatred in his eyes as plain to see as a pair of headlamps on a clear night.

The familiars spread out, forming a perimeter around the ruins to prevent any unwanted attention from stray passers-by. Meanwhile, Igor pushed Iscat's head into the piles of rubble.

'Come on,' he encouraged. 'What can you smell? What's there?'

The seeker snuffled at the detritus left over from the fire, hunting for any scent that seemed unusual.

Iscat had no idea what he was seeking, but Igor had worked with him before, and he was confident that anything extraordinary, would set the Grinder off. Like a dog sniffing a mound of raw hamburger. Unusual scents, powerful auras of any kind. Something exceptional.

The Grinder shuffled from area to area, falling over every now and then as the hobble tripped him up. Whenever he stumbled, Igor struck him again.

After ten minutes, Iscat froze. His nose was buried in a mound of torn up carpet. He sniffed frantically and then let out an animal-like howl and whipped his head back and forth in an attempt to escape his collar.

'He's got something,' announced Igor.

Yelena ran over. ‘What?’

Igor shrugged. ‘Not sure. That’s the problem with using a seeker, you’re never that sure what they’re going after. But I’ve seen him take a scent before, and he’s never been this excited. So, whatever it is, I guarantee it’s well worth us following.’

‘How does it work?’ asked Yelena, who had never operated with a seeker before.

‘It’s easy,’ answered Igor. ‘Now he has their scent and the imprint of their aura, we can put him in a car, a train, even a plane, and he will always look towards the target. It’s uncanny. I suggest we get back in the vehicles and simply follow, his nose. Literally.’

‘Okay,’ agreed Yelena. ‘He’s your responsibility. Let’s give it a go.’

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CHAPTER 54

Hadad held up the three coins. They had been joined together with links of pure silver and attached to a full-length necklace of white gold. There were another twenty-seven open links, in readiness for the rest of the Triginta.

He bowed ever so slightly as he handed the relic over to the king.

Belikov accepted it with shaking hands, his eyes glowing red with both greed and desire. He pulled the chain over his head and allowed the three coins to rest on his chest, directly against his mottled skin. As they touched his flesh, a crackle of electricity rippled across his body and a cloud of smoke rose towards the ceiling.

It took all of his control to stop from wincing as a wave of pain crashed over him.

And then it was gone, to be replaced it with a high of both physical and mental acuity. It was as if scales had been torn from his eyes and a weight lifted from his back. The feeling of power was almost overwhelming and he felt the need to stride forth and conquer. To rend his enemies and see them fly in terror before him.

To command.

To control.

He muttered to himself as he stroked the coins with his right hand, rubbing them softly between thumb and forefinger.

Hadad smirked to himself. ‘Gollum,’ he said under his breath.

Belikov stared at the philosopher. ‘What?’

‘Nothing of note, king,’ answered Hadad.

‘I trust that was not an insult you muttered, Arab.’

Jebe moved behind the philosopher and rested his hand on the blade at his hip.

Hadad raised an eyebrow. ‘If you want to take it as so, then yes, I suppose it could be looked on as an insult,’ he admitted. ‘But an insult is a perceived thing. You can only be insulted if you allow yourself to feel insulted. Otherwise, it is a mere utterance of words signifying nothing but the thoughts of the utterer. Anyway, it was an observation, not an insult.

‘Beware the power of the coins, king. Make sure you control them. They must never control you. Dominate them. Else they will dominate you.

‘You can feel the unbelievable power imbued within, and this is but a tenth of the final relic. The full *Triginta* will be almost impossible to

bend to your will. Even for one as powerful as you.

'You see, Blood King, that is how the curse works. It kills through supplying a surfeit of power. So much so that it corrupts, it poisons. Much like the radiation released during the Chernobyl incident.

'But as you have all already been afflicted by such power, I would postulate that you are capable of overcoming the curse. Also, being undead tends to negate a death curse at any rate.'

Hadad chuckled, amused at the irony.

Both Belikov and Jebe stared at him like he was insane.

'You tread a fine line between usefulness and the true Death,' stated the king. 'Be careful you do not cross it.'

Hadad shrugged 'I will, or I won't.' he said. 'But as of now, I am still needed. Arend continues his quest for the rest of the Triginta. He is now searching for information on the people that buried King Euric. He theorises that one of them may have taken the rest of the *Triginta* and most likely broke it up to sell it on. Or perhaps one of the king's entourage stole it before that. Fear not, he will never stop searching.'

'And a team led by Yelena and Igor are searching for the Daywalker,' interjected Jebe. 'They have taken a squad of our Spetsnaz familiars and a seeker.'

Hadad frowned. 'A seeker? Why? They are notoriously unstable. Not to say untrustworthy. That is somewhat of a risk, don't you think?'

'You have a better way of tracking a subject across the length and breadth of Europe?'

'Not sure,' admitted the philosopher. 'Perhaps a charm of some sort.'

'Pah,' scoffed Jebe. 'Magic and nonsense. No, the seeker is the correct choice.'

'If you say so,' conceded Hadad.

'Enough,' said Belikov. 'Leave now. I want to be alone with... I want to be alone.'

Both ancients bowed and left the room.

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CHAPTER 55

The Professor tested the edge of the blade with a calloused thumb and nodded.

'Now stay still,' he said to Tag. 'I just want to stick this in your neck.'

'What?' yelled the big man. 'You mental or something?'

The Prof frowned. 'No. Maybe. Actually, that is a good question. After all, what is sanity?'

'Sanity is not wanting to stick a knife in someone's neck for no reason,' answered Tag.

'I have a reason,' countered the Prof. 'I want to time your recovery rate and map it against the figures we put together last year. I'm checking if your gift is getting stronger or weaker.'

Tag shook his head and turned away.

As he did so, the Prof stepped forward, plunged the blade into his neck and then pulled out an old-fashioned pocket watch and made a note of the exact time.

Tag fell to his knees, clutching at the blood gushing from his throat. Within seconds the flow of blood stopped and the big man got back to his feet.

The Prof scribbled some figures down in his note book.

'Crap,' shouted Tag. 'You ass, you ruined another one of my shirts. I ought to bop you one.'

Emily stood up and held Tag back. 'Stop,' she said. 'You know he doesn't understand. The Prof is obsessed with knowledge, stabbing you is just his way.'

'It'll be his way of getting bopped,' snapped Tag.

Emily grinned. 'Why? You're all better already.'

'Yeh,' admitted the big man. 'But it stings. Also, the shirts. That was my last one. And I don't care what those dudes at Tide say. It doesn't get blood out.'

'Tell you what,' said Emily. 'This afternoon, I'll take you to the Champs-Élysées, we'll find a fancy shop and I'll buy you as many shirts as you want.'

'As many as I want?'

'Sure,' said Em. 'Why not?'

'Twenty?'

'A hundred, if you want.'

'No, twenty is good,' said Tag.

As he started to strip off his sodden shirt, the door banged open and Merlin stalked in, his face pale with emotion.

'Bad news, I'm afraid,' he said. 'I have confirmed, the Morrigan has escaped her shackles. I suspect she has returned to *Éire*.'

'That is bad,' interjected the Prof. 'What do you suggest?'

'We need to move, soon,' answered Merlin. 'I have a place in the mountains, near Mont Blanc on the Italian border. It is well protected. I think we should leave as soon as we can.'

'Can't,' said Tag. 'The girly and I got shirts to buy. We can go after that.'

Merlin scowled at the big man. 'Tag,' he said. 'I hardly think the ire of the Goddess of War can compare to the frivolity of purchasing a few items of clothing.'

'It's not frivolous,' argued Tag. 'It's a necessity. Specially if that Boggart keeps stabbing me for his research.'

Merlin glanced at the Prof who shrugged.

'Pack,' commanded Merlin. We need to get to Mont Blanc as soon as possible.

'We can plan what to do from there, but I tell you this; we are looking at a continent-wide struggle. And this one might very well be harder and cost us more than the last one.

'It's time to gather the troops. It is time to prepare for battle.'

Emily blanched as she recalled the death and destruction and the heartache brought on by her last war.

And she wondered if she would be capable of living through such terrible loss and despair once more.

But she knew she would, because she had to.

For Emily Hawk knew …

Only the dead have seen the end of war.

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Book 6 DOMINATION

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CHAPTER 1

Yelena looked at the Grinder with utter contempt. ‘How can you be sure he has tracked down the Daywalker?’ she asked.

Igor shrugged, his massively overdeveloped shoulders shifting under his suit like human tectonic plates. ‘Can’t,’ he admitted. ‘That’s why I sent one of the familiars to check. A couple of simple questions and we shall have our confirmation.’

Iscat the Grinder started howling as he attempted to break free of the binds Igor had restrained him with. Igor punched him in the neck to shut him up and the creature whimpered into silence.

A few minutes later, the familiar returned and got into the vampire’s blacked-out SUV.

‘Report,’ commanded Yelena.

‘They were here,’ stated the ex-Spetsnaz member. ‘A tall blonde. Looks like a fashion model. Three men with her. All large. The man on duty describes them as, scary.’

‘You say, were?’

‘Yes,’ confirmed the familiar. ‘They left not two hours ago. The reception says when they left, two old men joined the group.’

‘Where were they heading?’

The familiar shook his head. ‘No one has any idea. Sorry.’

‘Fine,’ said Yelena. ‘Return to your vehicle. Igor will get the Seeker to find them. Two hours is not much of a head start. We are getting close.’

The monster vamp smiled. An awful sight to behold.

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CHAPTER 2

‘Can we stop for French stew with some of that long bread?’ asked Tag. ‘I’m starving.’

‘Sure,’ answered Troy. ‘As soon as we get out of Paris. I could do with some grub as well.’

‘You literally ate just before we left,’ noted Emily.

‘True,’ agreed Troy. ‘But it was a rushed snack, because Merlin was so insistent that we get going.’

‘You had three steak sandwiches,’ argued Emily. ‘Tag had four.’

‘I do not recommend stopping,’ interjected the Prof.

‘Why?’ asked Emily.

‘We are being followed.’

Merlin turned to face the Fae Professor. ‘Already? How can she have gotten on to us so quickly?’

The Prof shook his head. ‘Not her,’ he replied. ‘Someone else. Can’t you feel it?’

Merlin closed his eyes and concentrated for a few seconds, then he let out a heavy sigh. ‘Yes,’ he affirmed. ‘Of course. Damn it, how could I have missed that?’

‘Easy,’ said the Prof. ‘It’s because they are not using a spell. There is no overt magic involved, but whatever it is, there is a certain amount of unnatural feeling about it. I am not sure what it is.’

No one spoke as they allowed the Prof and the wizard to think.

‘Not human,’ ventured Merlin.

‘Definitely not,’ concurred the Prof. ‘Almost animal.’

Again, Merlin closed his eyes. ‘Got it,’ he exclaimed. ‘It’s a Seeker. I remember that signature from the Arthurian wars.’

‘A Seeker?’ asked Emily.

‘It’s a *Nosferatu* anomaly,’ explained the Prof. ‘Usually a Grinder that has randomly developed the skill while being turned. They develop the ability to track a target across oceans if need be. Fortunately, as they are so phenomenally dim witted, they are relatively easy to fool.’

‘How?’ asked Emily.

Merlin grinned and wiggled his fingers. ‘Magic,’ he said. ‘I shall create a false path for them to follow. Lead them in a different direction.’

‘That will work?’ asked Emily.

‘Merlin shrugged. ‘Probably. What worries me is why they are looking for us, and who are they?’

‘How will we know if it has worked?’ asked Troy.

‘Well, I suppose we’ll know when whoever they are stop following us,’ replied Merlin.

‘Cool,’ said Tag. ‘Then can we stop for stew?’

Emily rolled her eyes, and Merlin didn’t deign to answer.

Instead, both Merlin and the Prof sat down at the table in the rear of the campervan. The Prof took out a roll of parchment from his ever-present leather case and Merlin appeared to pluck a pair feathered quills and a pot of ink from thin air.

Then the two of them proceeded to scratch hundreds of tiny designs on the parchment, seemingly at random. Some of Merlin’s runes and shapes overlapped the Prof’s and many of the Prof’s were so tiny they looked like little more than slightly blurred dots.

Even when the vehicle hit a pothole and bounced rather alarmingly on its enhanced suspension, neither of the ancients missed a beat, their respective quills pausing only to be dipped into the ink and then returning to the parchment.

Emily, Troy and Tag watched closely for almost ten minutes; the strange writings being fashioned proving to be almost hypnotic in their production.

Muller, who was driving, kept his eyes on the road.

Tag was the first one to lose interest and he got up and went to sit in the passenger seat next to the Knight.

‘What’s happening back there?’ asked Muller.

‘The two old men are writing loads of stuff on a piece of paper,’ answered Tag. ‘Meanwhile, Tag is starving to death. It be inhumane.’

Muller reached down, flipped open a storage compartment and took out a large packet of what looked like jerky. He flicked it at Tag who caught in with one hand.

‘What’s this?’

‘Smoked Andouillette sausage,’ answered Muller. ‘It’s a French specialty.’

Tag peered suspiciously at the dried sausage. Then he opened the bag. An awful smell wafted out.

‘Man, this sausage is off,’ he said as he twisted the bag shut.

Muller shook his head. ‘No, it just smells like that. Trust me, it’s fine.’

Tag cracked the bag open and took another smell. ‘No ways. Smells like crap. What’s it taste like?’

Muller thought for a few seconds before he answered. ‘Honestly? Must admit, tastes a bit funky.’

Tag frowned. ‘Well why you buy it then?’

Muller shrugged. ‘It’s an acquired taste. Try some, it’s not so bad once you get past the smell. And the taste.’

Tag opened the window and threw the bag out.

'Hey,' yelled Muller. 'That stuff isn't cheap.'

'Bloody French,' mumbled Tag. 'Snails and Frog's legs and fish eggs and stinky crappy sausage.'

No one spoke as Merlin and the Prof continued their scratching. After another twenty minutes, the parchment began to glow with a bright yellow light. Both of the men began to chant softly under their breaths as they carried on sketching. A high-pitched whine filled the air, like a finger running along the rim of a crystal glass.

The light brightened and then, with a flash, the scroll disappeared.

Both Merlin and the Prof sank back in their seats, sweat pouring down their faces.

'It is done,' said Merlin. 'We have sent them on a merry goose chase.' The wizard allowed himself a small smile. 'And I think they will be suitably unenthusiastic with the outcome.'

'Excellent,' said Tag. 'Can we stop for stew now?'

'Tag,' said Merlin wearily.

'Yep?'

'Shut up.'

The vehicle continued down the highway, heading out of Paris and towards Merlin's mountain hideout, some five hundred miles away.

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CHAPTER 3

The two SUV's bumped down the rough track, driving deeper into the rugged countryside that made up the Pyrenees region of Southern France.

The Chernobyl vampires, their pet Grinder and a familiar driver were on point in their fully blacked out vehicle. The Spetsnaz familiars took up the rear, following the Seeker's directions.

Then the rear vehicle flashed its lights and pulled over. The lead car followed suite while the ranking Spetsnaz member leaped out, jogged to the vampire's vehicle and got in.

'What?' snapped Yelena.

The familiar was an ex-Spetsnaz operative named Timofey Cherny, but all called him *Starshyna*, which was short for Senior Sergeant. 'I know this road, mistress,' he answered.

'So?'

'It leads to a place called, The Farm,' continued *Starshyna*.

'This had better have some relevance to our search,' said Yelena. 'Because I do not take well to time wasting.'

'The Farm is a nickname that the troops have given this place,' explained *Starshyna*. 'It is where they are trained.'

'Who?'

'The *Légion étrangère,'* answered the familiar. 'The French Foreign Legion.'

'Why would the Daywalker be visiting the Legion?' queried Igor.

Starshyna shrugged. 'I have no idea, Master,' he answered. 'But I do know one thing. We need to display some caution.'

Yelena sneered at the Spetsnaz veteran. 'Why?' she questioned. 'Are you afraid of them?'

Starshyna looked at the hideously deformed super-vamp. His gaze was steady. Calm. Accepting.

He nodded. 'Yes, mistress,' he admitted. 'The Legion have a saying - *Honneur et Fidélité pericula ludus ad unum.'*

'I have never bothered to speak that repugnant language,' snapped Yelena. 'Translate.'

'It is difficult to translate directly, mistress,' replied *Starshyna*. 'But the gist of it would be – *We hunger for danger, and will die for the Legion.*

'And it is not simple rhetoric, mistress. If you get into a battle with these men, they will never surrender. You would have to kill every

last one of them.'

Yelena chuckled. 'So be it,' she said. 'If they are harboring the Daywalker, we shall grant their wishes. No longer will they hunger for danger, because we will deliver it to them. In terminal doses.'

Starshyna bowed his head in acceptance. 'As you say, so shall it be, mistress.'

'Yes,' confirmed Yelena. 'Now go back to your vehicle and continue to follow us. And no more unnecessary stops.'

'Mistress.'

Starshyna left and went back to his men.

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CHAPTER 4

Emily stared in wonder at the mountain range in front of her. She had seen mountains before. Or she thought she had. But now she looked upon the Alps, she realized she had actually only seen mere hills before.

Mont Blanc dominated the horizon, even though it was many miles away, its snow covered peak some fifteen thousand feet above sea level.

'Are we still in France?' she asked Merlin.

The wizard nodded.

'How far to your place? Is it across the border in Italy, or still here?'

Merlin smiled. 'I don't mean to be obtuse, but technically, it's both and neither.'

Emily frowned. 'So, it's on the border?'

'Yes and no,' continued Merlin. 'Why don't you wait until we get there. It's easier than explaining.'

Emily nodded.

'Come on,' said Merlin. 'If everyone has had a chance to stretch their legs, let's get back into the vehicle. The next bit may prove to be … disturbing.'

The team reboarded the van. No one bothered to ask why the wizard thought the next part of the trip would be disturbing. After all, sometimes, ignorance is bliss. Especially when it is folly to be wise.

For the first time since any of the team had known Merlin, he took the driver's seat.

'Umm,' started Tag. 'You sure you can drive this thing?'

Merlin shrugged. 'I hope so. I can drive a coach and horses, surely this can't be much different?'

The collective look of horror on the hunters' faces as they stared at the precipitous drop next to the winding mountain road was a sight to behold.

'Merlin has been driving since the automobile was first invented,' interjected the Prof. 'He is merely joshing you.'

The wizard put the RV in gear and trod down on the accelerator, taking off at double the speed Muller had been driving. The wall of rock on the left side of the van rocketed past at a frightening rate, and every now and then the tires would scrabble on the very edge of the cliff as the road was so narrow.

They proceeded up the mountain pass at pace while the Prof

mumbled to himself, muttering strings of calculations under his breath. The rest of the team stared pale-faced and white-knuckled at the narrow ribbon of blacktop as it spooled past them.

Merlin skidded around a corner and then took a sideroad left. It was less road and more like a natural fissure in the cliff face, barely wide enough to fit the vehicle through.

Emily looked through the windshield and saw that the fissure narrowed swiftly to a dead end some one hundred yards away.

'Merlin,' she yelled.

'Trust me,' he answered calmy.

So, they did.

The sound of Muller's praying almost drowned out the sound of the tires squealing as Merlin dropped a gear and hit the gas.

There was a thunderous crash, and the air grew as thick as treacle. Lights exploded in a riot of color so bright as to occlude sight. The world spun, and the vehicle juddered and shuddered as if it was about to shake itself to pieces.

Emily struggled to stop herself from throwing up as her stomach roiled and her inner ear rebelled like she was seasick. She heard the men retching as they were obviously afflicted with similar symptoms.

Except for Merlin and the Prof.

Then all movement stopped. The flashes of light slowly dimmed and the sounds faded away.

Emily realized she had closed her eyes and, as she opened them, the vista around her was revealed.

They were still in the mountains. But there was no sign of the narrow juncture Merlin had sped down. Nor the solid rock cliff he had smashed into.

Instead, they were near the very peak of a mountain that towered over all that surrounded it. In the distance she could still see Mont Blanc, but it looked tiny. Half the height of the peak they were parked on. And although she knew that was obviously impossible, it patently wasn't, as her eyesight attested.

'Where are we?' she asked.

'Still in the Alps,' answered Merlin. 'There, you can see Mont Blanc.'

'But, how?'

'Magic,' said the Prof.

'Obviously,' countered Emily. 'But how? I mean, are we still on earth? In the same plane? Or is this some sort of parallel universe?'

The Prof scoffed. 'No. We are still on earth. Merely in a hidden spot. An open area, if you will. Look on it as a folded section of space-time. Here and there but also neither.'

'I don't get it,' countered Emily.

'Well, if you have a spare couple of centuries, I might be able to

explain it to you.'

Emily raised an eyebrow. 'No, I'll take your word for it.'

'Come on,' interjected Merlin as he alighted. 'Follow me, all of you. Let's get ourselves settled in.'

Emily turned to see the magnificent sprawling chalet perched on the side of the peak.

'Behold, my mountain hideaway,' continued the wizard as he trudged through the snow towards the front door.

The rest of the team clambered out of the vehicle and trod in his footsteps.

With a flourish, Merlin opened the door. 'Welcome.'

'I hope you got some of that French stew,' proclaimed Tag. 'I is still hungry.'

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CHAPTER 5

Yelena and Igor waited for the sun to go down before they left their blacked-out SUV to do some reconnaissance.

The Farm was surprisingly un-military looking. There was a fence, but it was only six feet high and wasn't electrified. There were no guard towers. No infrared beams and no dogs.

Only the warning signs placed every twenty yards or so gave any hint that the boundary contained a military base of sorts.

In French and English, on a red background with a skull-and-crossbones motif above the writing – *Beware. Live fire area.*

And that was it.

'You will all stay here,' commanded Yelena, her girlish, summery-light voice belying her dreadful appearance and her psychotic demeanor. She stared at the Spetsnaz familiar and sneered. 'And it would behoove you to try harder to not display your obvious relief,' she snapped. 'Coward.'

Starshyna kept his expression blank. Firstly, because he knew he had hidden his feelings of relief well enough for them not to show. Secondly, because he knew he was no coward and finally, because only an insane person would argue against someone like Yelena.

Unless, of course, they were attempting to commit suicide-by-vampire.

'Your will, mistress,' was his only answer.

'Right. Igor, can you control your Grinder?'

'He is not my Grinder, Yelena,' snapped Igor. 'As well you know. But anyway, the answer is, maybe. They are difficult creatures. He should be manageable, and I have strapped his mouth shut so he won't be able to give us away with that incessant whimpering of his.'

'If he misbehaves, kill him,' instructed Yelena.

'The Blood King will be less than pleased,' noted Igor. 'Seekers only come around once every century or so.'

'Fine,' retorted Yelena. 'Don't kill him. But if he messes up, maybe I will kill you instead.'

Igor shrugged. 'I will do my best. Shall we proceed?'

Yelena didn't answer, instead she jumped over the fence and disappeared into the encroaching darkness.

Igor took a firm grasp of Iscat's lead and followed, literally dragging the Grinder by his neck.

***

Johnny Baker was an American born member of the legion and had been one for six years. He had fought and bled for the Legion. So now he was considered to be, *Français par le sang versé.* French by spilled blood.

He had recently attained the rank of *Caporal-chef*. Some of his childhood friends whom he still kept in touch with teased him about the rank. Calling him a corporal-cook.

He simply smiled and laughed at their heavy-handed humor. Because the designation, *Chef*, had nothing at all to do with cooking. In fact, it came from the Latin word for head, or Chief. And it was an old cavalry tradition. The same rank could also be referred to as *Brigadier-chef,* which Johnny quite liked. It sounded much higher up the food chain than it actually was.

He was at the farm for an eight-month course before he applied to be considered for the next rank up - *Maréchal des logis.* Basically, a Sergeant.

And like everything the Legion did, it was incredibly tough.

He had just finished a solid four hours at the range and was heading back to the armory to sign back in his FN-minimi light machine gun and single one-hundred round belt of 5.56mm ammo he had left over.

As he walked, he passed a group of twenty Legionnaires and their Caporal returning from a thirty-mile run. He noted with satisfaction the men looked tired but not exhausted. Quite a feat when you considered they were all in full battle gear including their FAMAS assault rifles, one hundred and fifty rounds of ammunition, food, water, med supplies and grenades.

It was a source of Legion pride that all exercises were carried out with live ammunition and full kit whenever possible. It was true that partly due to this tradition the Legion suffered more deaths in training than any other elite force. But the powers that be deemed the attrition rate acceptable. As did the soldiers themselves.

The sound of boots on the ground faded as Johnny got closer to the armory, passing by the empty parade ground and then behind the vacant classroom barracks.

Then something made him stop. A sixth sense built up from spending time in places like French Guiana and the Central African Republic. Terrible, close up wars made up of countless skirmishes, ambushes and landmines. Places where the climate and the jungle killed you as often as the bullets and blades of the enemy.

And where many had died, Johnny Baker had endured. Because he learned, never ignore that feeling. That sixth sense had saved his life on more than a dozen occasions.

So strong was the feeling, he took the belt of ammunition from its

pouch, opened the breech of the Minimi, loaded and cocked it. Technically, loading a weapon while not on the range and without express orders, was a punishable offence. But his combat honed instincts told him to ignore the rules.

Johnny stood motionless; head cocked to one side as he strained to hear something out of the ordinary. Get some idea of what had triggered his senses. The longer he stood, the more intense the feelings got. After almost a minute he was literally sweating. Waves of horror and revulsion washed over him in equal measure. Still, he heard nothing.

Then he smelled it.

A strange combination of odors. Rotten meat with a faint hint of something chemical. Johnny sniffed the air. Nail varnish remover, he thought to himself. Weird.

Then, from out of the shadows they came.

At first, *Caporal-chef* Johnny Baker thought he might very well be hallucinating. Two humanoid beings, massively muscled, over six feet tall with features straight out of some sort of hellacious nightmare.

And standing behind them, being led by a long lead attached to a collar around his neck, was another similar version of the repellent creatures. Except this one had been gimped out to the extreme. Leather muzzle, leather mittens, some sort of gag. Hands and feet hobbled together by lengths of stout rope.

'So, this is one of the famed members of the mighty legion,' said the one apparition in a voice that seemed more suited to a young kindergarten teacher than the demon that actually spoke.

Johnny took a deep breath and forced his brain to react. He either had to accept, or reject what he saw. But whatever, he knew he had to do something, because even as nonplussed as he was, he could feel the waves of power rolling off the creatures.

He raised his machine gun. 'On your knees,' he commanded. 'Now, or I will shoot.'

The female laughed. A light, effervescent giggle. 'Idiot,' she said. Then she turned to the male version of hell standing next to her. 'Igor,' she said. 'Kill him.'

Johnny didn't hesitate.

The Minimi spewed out hot lead at a rate of twenty rounds a second and Johnny chewed through the entire one hundred round belt in one go. Brass poured from the breech and the air was filled with dust as the rounds stitched a pattern of death in front of the Legionnaire.

As the dust cleared, Johnny saw that all three of the nightmares had moved. Not by much. Just by enough to avoid the hail of death he had unleashed. He frowned as he replayed the scenario in his head.

Sighting the target.

Pulling the trigger.

At no point had he seen them move.

Johnny chuckled to himself. ‘Fast,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ agreed the female. ‘That didn’t work out as you thought it would, did it?’

Johnny shook his head.

‘Anything to say before you die?’

‘Yeah,’ said the *Caporal-chef*. ‘You wierdo’s are beyond doubt the ugliest things I have ever seen.’

‘Also, the most powerful,’ snapped Yelena.

Johnny laughed out loud. ‘Sure, you haven’t met our Commandant. He makes you look like a pussy cat. And anyway, being powerful but having to look like you, let’s just say, it wasn’t a good trade.’

Igor snapped forward and punched Johnny in the ribs. The blow threw him back over ten feet and the sound of his rib cage breaking was clearly visible.

Johnny chuckled softly as he grimaced in pain. ‘You hit like a girl,’ he said.

Igor stepped towards him and picked him up by his shirt front.

‘For the Legion,’ grunted Johnny. ‘Until the last one.’

And he spat in Igor’s face.

The vampire exposed his canines, lunged forward and tore his throat out.

But as he threw Johnny’s body to the floor, the air around him turned to fire, as the twenty Legionnaires Johnny had seen earlier, opened fire.

Igor was fast, and tough, and he healed at a rate that beggared belief. But in the next two seconds he was struck by over four hundred rounds of accurate fire. And it is impossible to heal parts of the body that no longer exist.

For example, his head exploded into a fine red mist, which left him rather cranially challenged, to say the least. His limbs were torn off and his torso was so full of holes you would have been able to see daylight through it. Had it not been night.

Then they turned their attention to Yelena.

But in that tiny period of time, Yelena had managed to tear off Iscat’s restraints and, with a mighty heave, she threw the Grinder into the middle of the group of Legionnaires.

With a midnight screech, loud enough to rupture an eardrum, Iscat went apoplectic. Tearing and biting and punching. Like a wolf in a henhouse, he ripped through the soldiers, killing and feeding at the same time.

The Legionnaires fought back hard, but they were too close together to use their rifles or sidearms, so they had to go to blades and

unarmed combat techniques.

But tough as they were, they were no match for a rabid Chernobyl enhanced Grinder. One by one they fell. Yelena stood to one side, ready to dispatch anyone who attempted to escape. But none did.

Finally, when there were three Legionnaires left, one of them ripped a grenade from his webbing, pulled the pin and, as Iscat turned towards him, thrust the live ordnance into the Grinder's mouth.

The resulting explosion killed the three soldiers and reduced the top half of the Grinder to ground meat.

Yelena swore. This was inconceivable. Two top combatants taken out by a group of mere humans.

And still they had not found where the Daywalker was, or what she was even doing here. She had to decide whether to continue her search or call it a night and beat a tactical withdrawal. But before she could, she heard someone approach.

'Now that must be the most hideous thing I have ever seen,' the newcomer announced.

Yelena turned to stare at him. He was of average height. Crewcut hair. Dapper moustache and some sort of rank flashes on his shoulder. He carried a M32 semiauto grenade launcher. A squad support weapon that allowed a single combatant to fire six, 40mm grenades as fast as they could pull the trigger.

Unfortunately, to kill someone like Yelena, you would have to hit them with at least two or three grenades. And to hit them, your reaction speed would have to be superhuman.

So, the vampire immediately dismissed the soldier as a threat.

'And who would you be?' she asked.

'Oh, it talks,' noted the soldier, raising an eyebrow in surprise. 'I am Commandant Quinton Swanepoel. And you?'

'Irrelevant. However, answer me some questions and I will kill you swiftly. Refuse, and your death will take forever. Where is the Daywalker?'

'Who?'

'I know she is here,' continued Yelena. 'Our Seeker tracked her down. She would have arrived with a small retinue including two old men and two or three younger ones.'

The Commandant looked genuinely puzzled. 'This is a military base. There are no civilians here. It's forbidden. Man, are you stupid as well as ugly?'

Yelena concentrated, then she unleashed the full force of her coercion. 'Tell me the truth.'

Swanepoel flinched, but the vampire was surprised to see that he almost, but not quite, managed to shrug the coercion off. 'Hey,' he replied. 'I'm the Commandant here. I know who comes and who

leaves, and this Daywalker person is not in this camp.'

Yelena knew the soldier was telling her the truth and she threw her head back and screeched with frustration. Not only had she been led on a wild goose chase, but she had lost her Seeker and her second. The Blood King would be furious.

Well, she thought to herself. At least I can feed off this idiot.

She moved.

At the same time, Commandant Swanepoel pulled trigger of his M32 as fast as he could.

Yelena ran straight into a maelstrom of explosions. Because Swanepoel had already seen how fast the vampires were. So, he made no attempt to aim at her. Instead, he aimed where he thought she would be.

And he got it exactly right.

The six high explosive grenades tore Yelena to shreds.

Swanepoel looked down at the tatters of flesh the grenades had reduced the vampire to. Then he took out a small cheroot, lit it, took a drag.

'For the regiment,' he said. 'Until the last one.'

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CHAPTER 6

Tag placed a pot of tea on the kitchen table and passed out mugs to all. Then he turned to Merlin. ‘I want to learn how to do magic,’ he stated.

‘No,’ responded Merlin.

‘Why?’

‘Because.’

‘That ain’t no answer.’

‘If I may,’ interjected the Prof. ‘I can teach you a little prestidigitation. That would be a start.’

‘Predyi-who-what?’ asked Tag.

‘Prestidigitation. The art of small magics. Basically, practice spells for beginners. You know the sort of thing. Produce enough flame to light a pipe. Conjure a tiny gust of wind. Create a foul smell. Very minor spells. Then, once you have Mastered a few dozen of those, the real training can begin.’

‘That’s what I’m talking about,’ grinned the big man. ‘Let’s start with fire.’

The Prof shook his head. ‘No, no, no. It doesn’t work like that. First you need to learn how to cycle your energies. Fill your cores and harness the power around you.’

‘Cool. Let’s do that then. How long will this take? When can I light some stuff up?’

The Prof thought for a while. ‘It all depends on you. But let’s assume you have some inherent talent, and the will to learn. I would say … twenty years. Maybe more.’

‘Twenty years,’ exclaimed Tag. ‘Before I can light a pipe.’

The Prof shook his head. ‘No, you misunderstand.’

‘Oh, thought so,’ responded Tag with relief.

‘Yes, it will be twenty years of study and inner contemplation and meditation before you can even *begin* to learn how to master the fire spell. That will take another three or four years. At best.’

‘You serious?’

‘Of course,’ answered the Prof. ‘Why do you think wizards and magical practitioners are so old? It takes many centuries to garner such skills. Sometimes thousands of years. So, shall we start?’

Merlin chuckled. ‘There’s little chance of that,’ he said. ‘Look, he’s already lost interest. He hasn’t got anything like the patience needed.’

Tag raised an eyebrow. ‘I resent that comment,’ he said loftily. ‘I

don't deny it, but I do resent it.'

Merlin laughed out loud. 'You have different strengths, big man. But I am glad you brought up the subject of training. Everyone, listen up.'

The team put down their mugs and paid attention. Except for the Prof who started mumbling to himself and sketching out random patterns in the air.

'Don't take this the wrong way,' stated Merlin. 'But in the year that I have been away, you lot have got slack.'

'Hey,' interjected Emily. 'We were taking a break.'

'Granted,' conceded the wizard. 'But a break is a couple of weeks. You basically slothed about for a whole year.'

'I wouldn't say we slothed about,' argued Troy. 'It's not like we lay around in bed all day and watched telly.'

'As good as,' said Merlin. 'How often did you train? Spar? Shoot? Work on your sword forms?'

Both Emily and Troy looked down.

'I thought so,' said Merlin.

'We didn't slack off,' stated Tag with a smirk.

'Yes, you did,' snapped Merlin. 'I know, the two of you continued to fight the good fight. But you got sloppy.'

'How would you know?' asked Muller. 'You weren't there.'

'Because, I know,' said Merlin. 'You cannot simply do what you do without a serious training regime. Okay, you stayed alive. Good. But as time goes on, your performance will degrade. Little by little. You are already not as sharp as you were when you trained every day. So, maybe not now, or even in six months, or a year, but sometime, those tiny, incremental losses of speed and form will kill you. Those uber-vamps you told me about…'

'The BUMF's,' interjected Tag.

'What?'

'Big Ugly Mother Fu…'

'Oh, yes,' said Merlin. 'Those. Ha, BUMF's good one. Anyway, they are obviously a cut above your usual bloodsucker. And if we start coming across them in numbers, well, they will kill you.'

'Hold on…' started Emily.

Troy butted in. 'No, Em,' he said softly. 'Merlin is right. I know you took out that BUMF relatively easily, but I struggled with mine. That's why I got so pissed when Muller helped. I wasn't sure if I could take him, and that scared me. I wanted to prove to myself I could do it.'

Emily frowned. 'If we're all being honest,' she admitted. 'I didn't find it as easy as you say. I had to go full out to take him down. He was fast, strong, tough and he healed faster than anything we have ever come across.'

'And ugly,' added Tag with a shudder. 'So ugly.'

Emily laughed quietly. ‘Yes. True. But not sure if that made any difference to the actual fight.’

‘So, what are you saying?’ asked Muller. ‘That we put together some sort of daily training routine?’

‘Partly, yes,’ answered Merlin. ‘But *you* will not be putting the routine together.’

‘Who then? You?’ asked the Knight.

Merlin stood up. ‘Come with me,’ he said as he headed for the door.

The team followed the wizard outside and into the snow. The weather had worsened since they had arrived, and now an icy wind cut across the mountain, driving flurries of sleet and snow before it.

A few yards away, partially obscured by the eddies of snow, stood a man. He wore high top leather boots like a cavalry officer. Lightweight linen trousers and a leather jerkin that left his arms bare, despite the driving wind. His only nod to the weather was a full, brown woolen cloak that billowed about him. In his right hand he held a six-foot wooden staff with steel caps at both ends.

As the team walked closer, Emily noticed with a shock that she had been mistaken when she assumed the figure was human. Now that she could see him more clearly, his furred face, whiskers, and covering of light tawny fur, plus his obvious tail, belied his initial human appearance.

She pushed her senses out, attempting to get some sort of read off the figure. An idea of what he actually was.

But it was like she was concentrating on a rock. He gave off no discernable aura. Not even a noticeable sign of life. It was as if she were looking at a statue. Not a living being.

‘People,’ said Merlin. ‘May I introduce the Fae weapons and combat expert, Master Ben Chu.’

Ben bowed slightly and walked forward. Emily noticed straight away that he left no footprints in the snow.

‘Salutations, hunters,’ he greeted. His voice was low and calm. Comforting, with a background purr to it, like a satisfied tabby cat. But his eyes were the eyes of a leopard, contradicting the gentleness of his speech.

Emily felt the werewolf part of her struggle to come to the fore as it perceived a rival alpha. She glanced sideways and saw that Troy was reacting the same way, his teeth elongating, his features changing. Not a full change, simply a showing of force. A statement.

I see you, and I show you my power.

It was a primal thing over which neither of them had full control.

Ben smiled at them, his canines glinting in the weak sun. ‘Settle down,’ he advised. ‘Not here to challenge anyone. However,’ he continued, and he spun his staff at such speed it became a mere blur.

And such was the power he imparted, it literally tore a clear patch around him, blasting the wind-whipped snow away like he controlled his own personal tornado.

But at the same time, he projected an aura of calm. Relaxation.

Both Emily and Troy felt their inner wolves relax as the Master provided a tranquil balm to their senses.

'Wow, cool stick work, leopard-man,' said Tag.

Ben's demeanor changed instantly, and the feeling of calm was replaced by a maelstrom of anger. 'What you call me?' he growled.

Merlin stepped forward. 'Tag, calling one of the Moorfolk an animal is a deadly insult.'

'Why?'

'Because, *human*, I am no animal. Now, apologize.'

'Why?'

'You insult me.'

Tag shook his head. 'No, I didn't. You were insulted. But that's your problem. If I were to insult you, you would know. You gonna throw your toys out the cot every time someone says something you consider an insult? Hell, I call Troy, wolfman all the time. Imagine he went ballistic every time I did that. But, if it's an apology you're looking for, I'm sorry you get pissed for so little. There, happy?'

The Master turned to Merlin and raised a quizzical eyebrow. 'Are they all like this?'

Merlin grinned and nodded. 'In their own ways, yes.'

Ben looked at Tag for a moment and then nodded. 'Fine. Apology accepted, fat man.'

Tag smiled. And then frowned. 'Fat? Me, fat? I'll have you know this is all solid muscle. Well, mostly. Okay, I might have let myself go a little. Probably all that French stew … but, fat? I don't think so.'

The big man was about to expand on his argument when he noticed no one was listening to him, as Ben introduced himself to each of the rest of the team in person. Shaking them by the hand and offering a small bow.

'I have invited Ben here so he can oversee your training,' explained Merlin. 'He is a Master in all forms of armed and unarmed combat. In the Fae realm, Ben Chu is considered to be the Master of Masters. Trust me, we are extremely lucky and privileged to have him.'

'I'm sure you're good,' stated Troy. 'I mean, that staff work was very flashy. However, and I mean no disrespect here, we are all pretty bad assed ourselves. What makes you think …'

Troy didn't finish his sentence. On account of the fact that he was sprawled out, on his back, in the snow. A trickle of blood ran down his left temple.

None of the team had seen the Master move. Not even Emily.

‘Fast,’ noted Muller.

‘Yeah,’ concurred Tag. ‘But how strong is he?’

Ben held his staff out towards the big man. ‘Here,’ he said. ‘Take it from me.’

Tag scowled. ‘Really? Is this some sort of trick?’

‘No trick. Simply grasp the end of my staff, and take it from me.’

Tag contemplated the Master for a few seconds, and then he leaned forward, grabbed the end of the staff with both hands, flexed his muscles, and pulled.

Ben did not move. Not an inch. Neither did the staff.

‘Come on,’ said Muller. ‘Put your back into it, big man. I’ve seen you uproot full grown trees and you can’t take a stick off this little man.’

There was a hint of movement and Muller joined Troy in the snow. Tag still hadn’t been able to move the Master. But somehow, the Moorfolk Master had downed the Knight while continuing to deny his staff to Tag.

Emily cocked her head to one side and decided to take a different tack. Instead of attacking physically, she called on her massive powers of coercion and launched them at the Fae Weapons Master, commanding him to release the staff.

For the first time, the Master looked visibly shocked. Tag still couldn’t remove the staff, but it did appear to move perhaps an inch or two in his direction.

Then the Fae Master simply disappeared.

And Emily joined Troy and Muller in the snow.

Tag raised his hands. ‘Last man standing,’ he crowed. ‘Who da man?’

There was a blast of air. A flurry of snow…

And Troy turned his head to look at the big man who was now lying next to him.

Without bothering to stand, Troy took out a pack of cigarettes, extracted, lit up, and blew out a puff of smoke that was dragged away by the wind.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘Don’t we look stupid.’

‘A lesson in humility,’ noted Muller.

‘Yep,’ agreed Emily. ‘That didn’t quite turn out like I expected.’

‘I’m not fat,’ said Tag. ‘I’m burly.’

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CHAPTER 7

‘It entirely about control,’ said the Master.

Emily shook her head. ‘It’s all a bit Karate Kid, don’t you think?’

‘I no idea what you talking about,’ responded Ben. ‘I know not of this young karate goat you speak of.’

‘Kid as in child,’ explained Emily. ‘Not as in young goat.’

Ben shook his head. ‘I do not care. Get back on top of tree stump and take form I have shown you. Stalking Crane.’

Emily frowned, but she jumped back onto the four-foot-high stump and assumed the position. Hands to her side, one leg up, supporting leg slightly bent.

The raw wind whipped at her loose top and thin linen trousers. She was absolutely freezing, but the Master insisted all wore no more than lightweight moccasins, and a thin linen tunic and trousers.

Cold was all in the mind, he said.

Emily wasn’t convinced. It seemed as though the cold was actually in her bones. But after the display of skills Ben had shown the team, she was more than willing to follow his instructions to the letter.

And his first observation was – the entire team lacked control.

Mental, physical and spiritual.

Although he did admit that each of them was afflicted in varying ways.

For example, Muller had adequate spiritual and mental control, but he had fallen behind in his physical. Perhaps because he had been relying too heavily on Tag’s strength and ability to stay alive.

Emily was physically acceptable, and her mental powers were off the charts. But she lacked control in every aspect of her being. She was badly out of balance and Ben was pleased Merlin had called him. Much longer and the Master doubted he would have been able to correct Emily’s frightening tendency to allow herself to be steered towards the darkness.

Even now, he was not sure how much he could actually achieve.

Troy was an odd mixture. His physical control was good, and his spiritual aspect was strong. Most likely because of his bond with the Pack. Wolves are after all, very spiritual creatures. But anger and passion controlled him to a greater extent than they should. It was an inequality of emotions.

And then there was Tag.

The Master sighed to himself. If perfect imbalance was possible, the

big man had achieved it. But that in itself made no sense. Because perfect imbalance was actually the same as perfect balance. To be honest, Ben was baffled. For the first time ever.

He decided that Tag was Tag, and all he could do for him was to make an attempt to steer him in the right direction and hope for the best. Because, when it came right down to it, Tag put all of his friend's lives above his own. His bluster and forthrightness covered a heart of gold and a capacity to sacrifice himself without thought or qualm.

In many other ways, he was a toddler in a giant's body.

Ben liked the big man very much. But he would never tell him that, he was already impossible enough.

He looked up at Emily as she balanced on the stump. 'Very good. Now, hold that for next two hours.'

'Two hours? Are you serious?'

'Yes,' answered Ben. 'This about control. After that, swop legs and hold for another two. Tomorrow, we try three.' The Master glanced at the wan sun. 'I see you in four hours. I need instruct the rest of the team.'

'I'll freeze to death in four hours,' snapped Emily.

'Try not to,' advised Ben. 'It would be inconvenient.'

And in the blink of an eye, he was gone.

Emily swore under her breath, but she continued to hold her pose, determined to do as she was instructed. She knew that, however strange Ben Chu's instructions may appear, he was a Master in the arts, and his display of marshal power had been extremely impressive.

She started a mental countdown and tried her best to ignore the icy cold.

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CHAPTER 8

The staff struck Troy again. Hard. Leaving a welt across his back. It healed almost instantly but it still hurt.

He moved fast, dropping below the next blow. But although he was fast, the Master was faster, and the steel cap on the end of the staff cracked against his temple.

Without conscious thought Troy began to change, allowing his anger to drive the process.

'Stop,' roared Ben. 'Balance. The wolf not control you. You not control wolf. Together, you are one. A perfect blend. Controlled existence. Balance.'

Troy forced the wolf down. And the staff smacked him in the head again.

'No. Do not seek subjugate the wolf. I not repeat myself; the wolf is you and you are the wolf. Tell me, Omega, how this so difficult for you? You not two separate beings, until you embrace that concept, you be a less efficient warrior.'

For the first time, Troy-wolf began to grasp what the Master was telling him. But it was not easy. The pack way had always been about dominance. Alphas, Omegas, leaders, followers. The wolf must be controlled. The human side was boss.

Now he saw how much energy that consumed. How inefficient it was. If both human and wolf could live in perfect harmony – then all of that wasted energy could go towards his ability.

More strength.

More speed.

More…

Ben Chu smiled. 'You begin see.'

And he hit Troy on the head again.

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CHAPTER 9

Muller kissed his silver crucifix and tucked it into his linen shirt. He had been standing in the driving snow for over three hours now. Even though he had no watch, he knew how long it had been. This was because he had just finished reciting another fifty-three Hail Mary's, six Our Father's, five Glory Be's and seven other intercessory prayers. This ritual usually took him twenty-two minutes and he had just completed his eighth cycle.

Muller the Pious.

Waiting for the Master.

'Does that help?' asked Ben as he literally appeared next to the Knight.

To give Muller credit, he didn't jump, although if one had been looking closely, they would have noticed a slight tension around his eyes.

'Of course,' he answered. 'My God is everything.'

Ben nodded. 'I always found the gods to be capricious and, on whole, rather small minded.'

Muller smiled. 'There was a time when I would have condemned what you just said as blasphemy.'

'And now?'

'And now, I have met other gods. And some are as you describe. Others, not so much. But one must always remember, my God is spelled with a capital "G".'

'So, He Omega of pack?'

Muller shook his head. 'He is the Alpha and the Omega. The First and the Last. The Beginning and the End. The One Who Is and Was and is Still to Come.'

Ben nodded. 'And you strive be like him?'

Muller chuckled. 'No, Master Ben, I strive to serve him. No more, no less. And I shall continue to do so to the best of my ability until death.'

'And I shall help you,' stated the Master. Using his staff, he scraped away a patch of snow to reveal a large boulder. It most likely weighed in at around six hundred pounds. 'Pick that up,' he instructed. Then he pointed with his staff to a tree standing twenty feet away. 'And place there.'

Muller frowned. 'It is too heavy, Master. I will be unable to do it.'

'Try,' insisted Ben.

Muller rolled his shoulders, rubbed his hands together, wrapped his arms around the rock and took the strain.

It moved.

Barely.

Less than a single inch.

'Told you,' proclaimed the Knight.

'Good,' said Ben. 'Continue trying. When becomes too dark to see, make way back to dwelling. Then tomorrow, get here first light. Repeat until give you permission stop.'

Muller watched the Weapons Master walk off into the swirling snow.

Then he bent down and began his next attempt.

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CHAPTER 10

Tag looked suspiciously at the contraption that Ben had cobbled together.

Basically, it was a long length of thin rope that ran from a stake to a tree about fifty yards away. The other end of the rope was attached to a spring driven trapdoor in the bottom of a wooden bucket.

The bucket was filled with smooth pebbles, each as large as a golf ball.

'Okay, what's this?' asked the big man.

Ben leaned forward and pulled the rope. The trapdoor sprang open, and a single pebble fell to the floor. From yanking the rope to the pebble hitting the snow, it took perhaps two seconds. Maybe two and a half.

'It's a stone fall down bucket contraption,' noted Tag. 'So what?'

'Speed,' answered the Master. 'That what you lack. You have strength and healing, no speed.'

'Hey, I'm plenty fast,' argued Tag.

Ben shook his head. 'You slow, like pregnant hippo. Rely wholly on strength and invulnerability when fight.'

'And missus Jones,' added the big man.

Ben frowned. 'Once again,' he noted. 'You speak words make individual sense, but as whole they mean nothing to me.'

'Whatever,' responded Tag. 'So, what do you want me to do with the bucket thing?'

'Is simple,' answered Ben. 'I want you catch pebble.'

'Easy,' scoffed Tag as he strolled towards the bucket. 'Wait a second, then pull the rope when I'm ready.'

'Stop,' commanded the weapons Master. 'You misunderstand. Again. *You* need pull the rope.'

Tag frowned. 'Then how am I supposed to catch the stone? It's too far away.'

'Speed,' repeated the Master.

Tag looked at the rope. Then the bucket. Then the tree. And he laughed. 'What? Run fifty yards through the snow in two seconds?'

'Yes.'

'It's impossible.'

'For pregnant hippo. Yes. For vampire killing, superhero. Maybe not.'

'Am I the superhero?' asked the big man.

‘Not yet.’

Tag nodded. ‘Okay. I’ll try. How many times?’

‘Bucket full of pebbles. Try until bucket empty. Then fill bucket start again. When dark, come home.’

Tag sighed and walked towards the stake holding the rope.

‘Wait,’ said Ben. ‘While you train, want you contemplate something. Because speed not just about physical. It also about mental. Speed will come as long as mind not thinking of it.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Yes. Seriously. Now, while you train, think on this. Nothing always as seems.’

‘I don’t get it. Like what?’

‘Ben smiled. ‘Like - how is it that sometimes, feet can smell and a nose can run?’

And the Master disappeared.

Tag stared at the empty space where Ben had just been. ‘Crazy man,’ he muttered to himself. ‘Just friggin crazy.’

He leaned down and pulled the rope.

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CHAPTER 11

Of all the amazing things that the humans had achieved, Arend considered the internet to be its acme.

Alas, to so many of them it was mere access to social media, or pornography. Few seemed to realize it as what it truly was.

It was the modern version of the lost Library of Alexandria.

Quite literally the font of all knowledge.

Okay, Arend was no fool. He did not allow the power of technology to pull the proverbial wool over his eyes. He could see that over ninety nine percent of all online content was absolute dross. But it was the one percent that was pure gold.

However, Arend was an arcane mage foremost and an ancient scholar second. His computer skills were close to non-existent. But after speaking to Hadad, he was put in contact with two other members of the team that were searching for the *Triginta*.

The identical twins, Monique and Mandrake DaCosta, cyber-info experts.

After communicating with them via a human techno-miracle called Zoom or Skype or Grinder - to be honest, Arend couldn't recall - they had followed his leads, and within days come back with actionable intelligence.

The twins had hacked into a raft of websites, including government tax records, birth and death records, and banks as well as various privately run companies that looked into people's ancestry for a fee.

Compiling all of the available data, they had produced a list of progenies and a set of family genealogies relevant to the people who had most likely buried the body of King Euric.

Arend had cross referenced these names with the information he had, and voila – he hit a perfect match.

The information led directly to a German family, the Hoffmans, who lived on the isolated island of Hoffmanland in the North Sea off the coast of Germany. There were reputed to be barely a thousand people living there. However, although visitors were unwelcomed to the privately owned island, it was rumored that the Hoffmans were actually the leaders of a powerful cult.

A sect that worshipped the Hoffman's as gods and had to pay a substantial amount to the family in order to move to the island.

The family themselves ran a large hedge fund with their supplicant's money, and they had turned it into a staggering amount of wealth.

Arend could see the obvious signs of the powers imparted by the *Triginta*.

And he knew he, and his colleagues, Mist and Remer, had to proceed to Hoffmanland Island as soon as possible.

He would charter a private jet.

The thought of Mist and Remer trapped inside a large steel flying box made Arend chuckle with anticipation. Another way to prove his sophisticated superiority over the noobs.

He called out to them.

'Mist, Remer. Ready yourselves, tomorrow morning early, we travel.'

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CHAPTER 12

The boat transporting them to Hoffmanland ground up against the shoreline.

Half an hour at sea, standing on the deck and surrounded by water had helped Mist and Remer to recover from their nightmare in the metal flying box that had brought them to Germany.

Disappointingly for Arend, the flight had not affected the two *Hulder* as much as he had hoped. Obviously, they were already adjusting to the human world. On the bright side, they would be able to help him in a more efficient manner. He would just have to find some other way to amuse himself.

'Wait here,' he instructed the boatman. 'I will contact you when we are on our way back. We may be a few hours.'

The man gave the *Hulder* a quick salute and sat back in his chair, relaxing.

The team jumped onto the beach and ran into the forest that covered much of the island. The pine trees were loaded with snow, and they could see smoke rising in the distance from multiple chimneys.

'Right, the information the twins furnished us with show the cult leader's dwelling is on the north side of the island. He keeps himself detached from the general population. As the images they gave us showed, he is protected. High walls, dogs and a couple of guards. But I feel there is little to worry us. After all, he is not a high value target to anyone and this island is so isolated they do not expect anyone to break in.

'Once we are in, we find Herr Hoffman and question him as to the whereabouts of the *Triginta*.

'Then we relieve him of it, take our leave and get the boat back to the mainland. Any questions?'

'Do we kill Hoffman?' asked Remer.

'Only if we have to,' answered Arend. 'We shall incapacitate him, but no need to kill.'

Both Remer and Mist pouted. They were looking forward to a bit of wet work.

'Fear not,' Arend assured them. 'Before this quest is finished, I am sure there will be many chances to satiate your blood lusts.'

The three *Hulder* ghosted through the forest, as light footed and agile as they were rumored to be. The sun had risen about two hours

before and as they ran, their acute hearing could pick up the sounds of the general population starting their days. The noises were unlike those of the current modern world, as the Hoffmans banned the use of motor vehicles on the island. Except, of course, for immediate family members. With them, no luxury was spared.

Solar and wind power provided the bulk of the electricity and the only way off the island was via sailboat. Or the Hoffman's fleet of luxury motor yachts, or private helicopters.

It was an island where everyone was equal. It was just that, some people were more equal than others.

The boundary wall to chief Hoffman's mansion loomed up out of the forest. It was around ten feet tall. No razorwire. A simple up and over job.

So, the three *Hulder* did just that, launching themselves over the wall with a little effort and a magical boost to their power, provided by a small spell from Arend.

A pair of Dobermans came dashing around the corner of the house, lips pulled back, snarling and frothing at the mouth.

The three *Hulder* looked at the animals with utter contempt.

Mist mumbled an arcane phrase and flicked a ball of lightning at them. There was a crackle of electricity and both canines fell, twitching to the floor, their fur smoking and steam rising from their burst eyeballs.

'Bit harsh,' noted Arend.

'Why?' asked Mist.

Arend shrugged. 'Actually, not sure why I thought that. Probably been with the humans for too long. You know, they keep them as pets.'

'What, like we keep pixies?'

'The same.'

Mist frowned. 'How very odd. Who would want a beast like that in one's dwelling?'

'They're very affectionate,' explained Arend. 'Sometimes they lick your face.'

Mist shuddered. 'Is that what those two were going to do?'

'No,' admitted Arend. 'Most likely they wanted to rip your face off.'

'Just as well then,' concluded Mist. 'Shall we continue?'

The three walked up to the front door. Arend tried the oversized door handle. It was locked. With a casual wave of his right hand, he blasted the lock out and they strolled in.

The entrance hall was a magnificent poem in marble and glass. A sweeping staircase curved upwards and the triple volume space above was dominated by a huge crystal chandelier.

Every possible surface that could be was leafed in pure gold.

Lifestyles of the rich and tasteless.

Remer nodded in appreciation. ‘This human has good taste,’ he noted.

As he spoke, a man in a dinner suit appeared from behind the staircase. Accompanying him was another man, this one in a lurid purple tracksuit and matching Nike trainers.

The man in the tracksuit was holding a pistol. With a sneer, he raised the weapon and pointed it at Arend.

‘Just what the hell do you think you are doing; you bunch of reprobates?’ asked the man in the dinner suit.

Without pause, Remer cast a ball of fire at the gunman. About the size of a baseball, white hot and as fast as a National League pitcher, it struck the gunman’s weapon, melted his arm off, incinerated the right-hand side of his torso and then went on to blast a hole through an awful portrait of some old person on a horse. Most likely one of the Hoffmans.

Purple tracksuit’s corpse hit the floor with a squelch.

The dinner suit gasped and his attitude underwent a miraculous change.

‘I am so sorry about the whole reprobate thing, sir,’ he addressed Remer. ‘How may I be of service?’

Remer giggled and chucked another fireball. It struck dinner suit in the face, causing it to explode in a cloud of red steam. ‘Gosh, this is fun,’ he crowed.

Arend smacked him on the back of the head. ‘Idiot,’ he snapped. ‘I wanted to ask him some questions. You bloodthirsty fool.’

‘He insulted us,’ argued Remer.

‘No,’ responded Arend. ‘He insulted me. You, however, are a reprobate. Now, for the sake of the gods, stop killing people until I’ve spoken to them. We need to find out where the head of the family is so we can get hold of the *Triginta*. Now, let me concentrate.’

Arend stood still, took a deep breath and then released a spell. A wave of power swelled out like ripples from a pebble thrown into a lake. Ten seconds later, the wave flowed back. Arend nodded.

‘Nineteen people in the house. Three upstairs, the rest towards the back of the dwelling. I think we can safely assume the owner is upstairs and the servants at the back. Let’s go.’

He led the way up the stairs.

They reached the top of the stairs and Arend continued walking with a purpose. His two compatriots followed him down a corridor, through a couple of doorways and, finally, to a large set of double doors.

‘They are in here,’ he declared. ‘Now, you can use a fireball. Blow the door down.’

Remer grinned and underhanded a fireball at the center of the double doors. It blew them both into the room like a burning tornado.

The sight that greeted the trio was … let's say – unusual.

Arend noted three beings. A naked woman, tied to a chair, her face covered in what appeared to be honey.

A naked man, holding a riding crop, his flabby paunch hanging down over his private parts, with a pair of stout leather boots on his feet.

The third being was – well, Arend wasn't sure. It appeared to be some sort of reverse-centaur. A woman's body and a horse's head. She also had hooves for hands and feet.

Mist was the first to ascertain what the being actually was. 'It's a mask,' she said. 'The woman is wearing a horse-head mask.'

Remer burst out laughing. 'My, aren't humans interesting,' he observed.

'What? How? Who are you?' shouted the naked man.

The woman on the chair stared lasciviously at the facsimiles the *Hulder* trio had donned, and she licked her lips. 'Yummy,' she said. 'I like.'

'Are you Hoffman?' asked Arend.

'Get out.'

'Can I kill him?' asked Remer.

'Shut up,' snapped Arend. 'Not yet. Now, I politely ask again, for the last time, are you Hoffman?'

The man took a few steps towards the Fae leader and swung his crop at his face. Arend didn't even bother to dodge. Instead, he simply flicked a tiny sphere of energy at the man's hand.

The crop stopped abruptly, as if the man had struck a wall, and then, with a pop like a bursting party balloon, his hand exploded.

'Do you see?' Arend said to Remer. 'Control. No need for massive balls of fire. And now, we can still question him.'

As he was lecturing his compatriot, the horse-masked woman slunk to the side of the room and used her plastic hoof to press a panic button. In the main village close to the house, alarm bells rang and people gathered.

Arend walked over to the naked man, who was now kneeling in the floor holding his wrist and staring at the shattered remains of his hand. At the same time, he rocked back and forth, keening shrilly.

Arend spun a gag out of air and slammed it against the man's mouth to stop the noise. Then he used another air construct to bind the man's wound.

'Right,' he proclaimed. 'I will remove the gag in a few seconds. When I do, the first thing that comes out of your mouth will be the whereabouts of the *Triginta*. Understand?'

The man stared up at him, his eyes filled with a mix of fear and confusion.

'And, done,' said Arend as he dispelled the gag.

'I don't know what the *Triginta* is,' the man stammered.

'Blow his leg off,' yelled Remer.

Mist giggled.

Arend held up his hand. 'No. No. Fair enough. He probably has no idea what I'm talking about. My bad. Let me explain. A necklace or torc, made up of silver coins. Roman ones.'

Recognition flared in the man's eyes. But he shook his head. 'Sorry,' he whined. 'I still have no idea.'

Arend frowned. 'Now, you see, you are lying to me.'

'No, I swear.'

A flick of the fingers and the man's left foot exploded.

Another gag of air halted the screaming.

The trio of Fae watched the naked man thrash about on the floor in agony.

'Why won't he tell us?' asked Mist.

Arend shrugged. 'Not sure. Most likely he knows that the family's power stems from it. Maybe he's simply braver than I gave him credit. Tell you what, let's start with the horse faced lady. Chop a few limbs off. Maybe she knows.'

The women in question ripped her mask off to expose a shrew-like face. Pinched features, large, pointed nose and a massive squint in her left eye.

'Please,' she gasped. 'I'll tell you where it is.'

'And who are you?' asked Arend.

'I'm Leticia Hoffman.' She pointed at the man on the floor. 'That is Frank Hoffman. Leader of the congregation.' Then she pointed at the woman tied to the chair. 'She's a whore.'

'I'm not,' shouted the chair-woman. 'I'm a faithful follower.'

'Oh, shut up,' snapped Leticia.

'So, Frank is your husband?' assumed Arend.

'Brother,' corrected the horse woman.

A flicker of disgust rippled across Arend's features. 'You play…never mind. Disgusting. So, you can show us?'

'Yes. The artifact of which you talk is the family's most prized possession. We call it, the Cup of Power.'

'Why?'

'Because it's a cup,' explained Leticia. 'And it gives us power.'

'I am looking for coins,' replied Arend.

Leticia nodded. 'Yes. There are three coins attached to the cup. Fixed to the side. Roman coins.'

'Where is it?'

‘In the study. I will show you. Follow me.’

‘Can I kill him now?’ asked Remer, pointing at the fallen man.

‘No,’ replied Arend. ‘Wait. Let us see if this creature is telling the truth.’

The naked horse-girl trotted out in front of them. She had removed her mask, but retained the plastic hooves on her hands and feet.

‘Hey, what about me?’ shouted chair girl.

Arend rolled his eyes. ‘Mist. Take care of her.’

Mist turned back into the room. There was a sharp pop and the female *Hulder* returned, wiping a spot of blood from her cheek.

‘All done.’

Arend stared at her. ‘I meant untie her.’ He shook his head. ‘Never mind.’

Horse girl opened a door and gestured for them to follow. They entered a study. Large, well appointed. More gold leaf.

Then horse girl grasped the frame of a huge painting situated over the desk. It was a glamorized version of the naked, paunchy man from the bedroom. In the painting he was more Napoleon and less Sad Sack.

With a grunt of effort, she pushed the painting to one side, running it silently on a set of tracks to reveal a safe door. Then she placed her hand on a screen next to the safe. Locks spun and the door clicked open.

Arend nudged her to one side and peered in. There were stacks of shrink-wrapped currencies of various types. A few jewelry boxes. A small statuette of a horse.

And a silver goblet.

Arend snatched the goblet up and studied it. Even before he noted the three coins soldered to the sides of the artifact, he felt the power. It throbbed in his hands like it had a heartbeat.

Visions of control and influence wielded came to him. Arend in charge of thousands. King. President. Anything he wanted. Loved by all. Worshipped by many.

But he was not swayed by them. Because all that drove Arend was his thirst for knowledge. And the prize he had his eyes on was more important than anything the *Trigint*a could offer him.

With a sigh of relief, he stowed the artifact in his jacket pocket.

‘Is that it?’ asked Remer.

‘Yes. Now we have six of the thirty.’

‘Can I kill the naked man?’

Arend nodded. ‘If you want. Be quick.’

‘What about me?’ asked horse girl.

‘Oh, of course. You,’ responded Arend. ‘Remer, you can kill this one as well.’

‘No,’ screamed Leticia.

‘Yes,’ chuckled Remer.

Pop.

Arend strolled from the room and headed for the stairs.

Behind him he heard Remer laughing loudly as he exploded Frank Hoffman.

Mist walked beside him.

As they reached the bottom of the stairs, Remer caught up. He was rubbing his hands together in glee.

‘Haven’t had so much fun since the Goblin insurrection,’ he said.

Arend opened the front door to exit the mansion.

To be confronted with a huge mob of people. They were carrying various weapons. Shotguns, swords, poles and axes.

‘What have you done to mister Hoffman?’ shouted one of them.

‘What the hell?’ grunted Arend in surprise.

‘Happy days,’ crowed Remer. ‘Can I kill them all?’

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CHAPTER 13

Arend shook his head in exasperation. Why was everything so darned difficult?

'Fine,' he said with a heavy sigh. 'Have fun, both of you. You deserve it.'

Remer wound up a spell, but just before he managed to release it, one of the mob members fired his shotgun at the *Hulder* combat mage.

Instinctively, Remer threw up a hasty shield and most of the buckshot was diverted. Although a couple of pellets punched through and struck him in his right shoulder. Remer looked at the wound in amazement.

'Hey, that peasant just attacked me with a thunder-stick.'

'Stop that right now,' snapped Arend. 'Remember when I warned you two about using stupid, dorky, noob language?'

Both Mist and Remer nodded.

'Well, *thunder-stick* most definitely falls into that category. It's a shotgun, you moron.'

Another shotgun boomed out. But by now, Arend had erected a full shield and the buckshot ricocheted harmlessly off it.

'Just so we don't offend again,' interjected Mist, ignoring the screaming mob as being rather inconsequential. 'What exactly does *dorky* mean?'

'And *noob*,' added Remer.

'Whatever,' sighed Arend. 'Just get rid of the peons so we can leave.'

Remer whooped and started throwing fireballs around like he was giving away free samples.

Mist preferred mini-tornados.

Both were equally effective.

As in, not very.

The problem was, they were taking the mob out piecemeal.

The fireballs would punch through someone and then explode, usually putting them down, sometimes simply maiming them.

Mist's mini-tornados were even less affective as an area attack. They would tear into a single person, smash them to the ground, and roll them about while ripping off their clothes and slowly, very slowly, shredding their skin and flesh.

Meanwhile, Arend had to enlarge his force shield in order to stop them being overwhelmed by the mob.

He was about to express his utter distain towards his compatriots'

feeble attack spells when he noticed the expressions on their faces. Or to be more correct, the expressions on the faces of the simulacrums they had adopted. But that was mere semantics, because the glamor's they had assumed, mimicked the actual wielder's expressions quite faithfully.

And that expression was one of absolute glee.

Arend had wrongly assumed the two of them were weak. Whereas, in reality, they were just enjoying themselves. Wringing out as much individual suffering on their targets as possible.

Cat and mouse.

With a chuckle, and a fatherly smile of, not quite pride, but at least slight approval, Arend kept up his force shield and allowed the noobs some fun.

However, after twenty minutes he began to lose patience. More Hoffmanlanders were arriving and, quite frankly the wanton violence was starting to bore him.

'Right, that's enough,' he stated as he wound up a massive area effect spell. With a slight grunt of effort, he unleashed it. A wave of power crashed out, causing a semi-solid wall of air to speed outwards and crush everything in its path.

The windows in the mansion shattered, doors imploded, walls cracked and roof tiles flew off like a hurricane had struck.

The human mob disintegrated. A foul sleet made up of human flesh and innards and bones coated the snow, turning the pristine white winter-wonderland into a Hieronymus Bosch nightmare.

'And that is how you do it,' snapped Arend. 'Now, let's move. Places to go, artifacts to discover and quite possibly, more humans to kill.'

Both Remer and Mist pouted their displeasure at Arend taking their toys away.

But after the awesome display of power they had just witnessed, neither dared actually voice their displeasure.

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CHAPTER 14

The table was over fifty feet long. Carved from the bones of the dead and lacquered in their blood. It was like a slab of red-black onyx. Torches flickered along the walls, creating more shadow than light.

Seated at the table, a mélange of various gods, godlings, banshees, demons and monsters.

At the head of the table sat, *Dhuosnsos*, often referred to as the Donn. The Celtic god of the dead. It was in his abode the meeting was taking place, although it was at the Morrigan's behest.

Standing to one side, in her form of a beautiful woman, stood the Morrigan. Her dress just wisps of blood red cloth as opposed to actual clothing. The cloth moved of its own accord as she paced back and forth, covering and revealing in equal measure.

Given her looks and her body, it should have been a spectacle of great desire. The epitome of carnal lust.

But the expression on her face ensured that any thoughts of desire were expunged from a viewer's mind. It was a look of such hatred, such rancor and malice, that it conjured little more than either fear, or grudging respect, depending on the entity who was presently observing.

'Humanity is weak,' ranted the Morrigan. 'They have forgotten the old gods. But no more. We must bring them back into the fold. By force if necessary. Because that is all they respect.

'They must be torn from their new false idols of technology and reality television.

'Punished.

'We must ferment war. Pestilence, to drive their worship, get them begging for a savior.

'Anarchy must be encouraged. And to start it all, we need to destroy anyone who stands against us. Particularly the Shadowhunters. The werewolves. Merlin.

'Let the vampires run free, let terror stalk the night until the only way for the humans to turn is towards us.'

There were murmurs of both agreement and dissent. Then the Donn talked. His voice rumbled across the room, like an avalanche of rocks. A force that carried with it more than mere sound. It was power incarnate. The power of forever. Of the end of all things.

The power of Death.

'Warrior woman,' he growled. 'This quest of yours smacks of a

personal vendetta. And many of us, unlike yourself, do not necessarily thrive on war.'

'Personal? Yes, perhaps,' admitted the Morrigan. 'But is this not personal to all of us. Is it not our collective worship that wanes? Anyway – why shouldn't I get my revenge? Merlin imprisoned me. He cast me aside like a filthy rag. And all because of her. That girl and her friends. She must suffer. They must all suffer for what they did to me.

'Surely, you of all of the gods should approve. After all, wholesale destruction, war and pestilence will pack your halls many times over. Think of all the death. You will have your fill and more.'

'Cease your termagant ravings, harridan,' roared the Donn. 'You assume, because I am the Lord of darkness, the King of the dead, that I will support your infantile tantrum. You think that I will support death and anarchy?'

The Morrigan leered. 'As you said, you are the Lord of death. The prince of the dark. How can you not support my quest?'

The Donn shook his head. 'Darkness is not evil,' he said. 'It is merely the absence of light. Nighttime is not a time for evil to stalk, it is a time for rest. Sometimes, eternal rest.

'I am not saying I condemn evil. Far from it. Both are needed for proper balance. Evil provides mankind something to fight against. Humanity is sword-born, and by the sword shall they perish. They yearn for battle. The darkness gives them something to rail against. Yes – I am dark - But do not assume I am evil.

'And beware, - the old gods have had their time. Do not seek to fight against humanity, they are powerful beyond your comprehension. They are many. And every day there are more of them.'

'But we are powerful,' argued the Morrigan.

The Donn scoffed. 'Are we? Look closely at the journey you are about to embark on, war goddess. Be careful that you do not get what you look for. I am the only constant. Death. You are but a fleeting moment in time. Even war has an end.

'Now begone, foul woman. I am sure there are some who may support you, but I am not one.'

The Morrigan was so incensed she shimmered and almost shifted into her giant crow form as she came close to losing control. The only thing that kept her from attacking the Donn was the knowledge that the King of the dead was all powerful in his domain.

What he said was the Lore.

Taking a deep breath, she turned and left the hall, striding through the stone arches and into the vast open cavern that marked the entrance to the land of shadows.

She stood for a while; half hidden in the gloom.

Alone.

Then she sensed a presence and turned to see the massive figure of Balor standing behind her.

The gigantic cyclops, leader of the Fomorians, a group of malevolent supernatural beings, nodded a greeting.

The Morrigan turned away, ignoring him.

'Do you recall the battle of *Mag Tuired*,' he asked.

Still the Morrigan did not react. Truth be told, she was wary. As the goddess of war, she was afraid of no one or nothing. But if she ever was to feel any fear, Balor might be the one to invoke it. He was a ruthless warrior, and his followers were denizens of evil.

Some call him the cyclops god, or the evil eye, others, the lord of destruction. He was a malicious and spiteful demi-god. Not to be trusted. But when you have little choice, sometimes one is forced to sleep with the enemy.

'I remember it well', replied the Morrigan. 'Arthur bested you.'

'No,' fumed the giant. 'Excalibur bested me. Curse that enchanted sword. Thanks to the gods of chaos, it is no more. And curse Arthur king, and his lacky, Merlin. I will stand with you, crow woman.'

The Morrigan thought before answering. But she knew, the enemy of my enemy is my friend – for now.

She spat on her palm and held it out. Balor did the same.

They clasped hands and shook once.

Oathbound.

The Morrigan smiled. It was a beginning.

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CHAPTER 15

‘Time moves differently in folded space,’ said Merlin.

‘How differently?’ asked Emily. ‘To my reckoning we’ve been here for over three months and I’m worried what is happening in the real world.’

Merlin chuckled. ‘This is also the real world,’ he said. ‘It’s just running parallel at the moment. But it is still a part of our universe.’

‘How long?’ asked Emily again.

‘You are correct,’ answered Merlin. ‘We have been here just over three months in present time. But in the Real World, as you like to put it, it’s been around three, maybe four days.’

Emily frowned. ‘How is that possible?’

‘It isn’t,’ quipped Merlin, and he wiggled his fingers at Emily. ‘But somehow, I make it happen.’

Emily was about to question the wizard further, when Ben appeared in his usual fashion. One moment, no Ben, next instant, Ben.

‘Training,’ he said.

Emily shook her head. ‘Don’t want to. I’ve been standing on that tree stump every day, all day doing that stupid Crane Kick for three months now. I’m sick of it.’

Ben nodded. ‘Fine. Follow me. Today we change things.’

He walked off into the snow and Emily followed. As they walked further from the house her ears picked up a sound of running water. Then a waterfall.

After another twenty minutes of fast walking, they exited the forest. In front of them stood a small waterfall. It was around thirty feet high and the water splashed down onto a rounded boulder below, throwing up an impressive amount of spray that became sleet as the frigid air cooled it to freezing point.

The Master pointed at a tree stump situated directly in the path of the majority of the frozen spray.

‘There,’ he said. ‘Get on stump. Assume the position. Kick. Repeat until nightfall.’

‘Hold on,’ interjected Emily. ‘That’s exactly the same thing I’ve been doing for the last three months.’

Ben shook his head. ‘No. Last three months no freezing waterfall. Assume position. Now.’

Emily scowled and then obeyed. She jumped onto the stump, assumed the Crane position and kicked. But the ice-covered wood was

like greased glass and she flipped over and fell to the ground.

'Get up,' commanded Ben. 'Continue. I see you tonight.'

He disappeared.

Emily clambered back onto the tree stump, stood on one leg, kicked.

And fell again.

She swore under her breath. This was going to be a long day.

Ben watched her from a distance. What none of the students realized was that the Master didn't teleport away, he simply faded into the background. He was there, but they could not see him or detect him in any way. He had become one with his surrounds.

The girl worried him. Of all of the students, she was the most problematic. And by far the most powerful. Much more powerful than he was. Or possibly even Merlin.

But she had no balance.

That was what he was trying to rectify. Hence the constant repetition of the same movement, The Fighting Crane. And now he had added a further level of discomfort with the freezing spray and the ice-covered stump.

Because Ben Chu knew that through mindless repetition one could eventually achieve a form of enlightenment. When the body and the task became one, that was when the mind would open to the next step. The ability to accept oneself. Until Emily allowed herself to be happy with what she was, there would be no balance.

Presently, she hated part of her own soul. She despised the darkness in her. She railed against it.

Instead, she should be accepting it. Not allowing it to rule, but accepting that it was a part of her.

For when she stopped fighting, then she would rob that part of her of any power. One cannot win a battle that is not being fought. That is what she had to understand.

But it would take a while longer. Her journey was long, and difficult, and it had barely begun.

Ben turned his back on her and made his way to see Muller.

***

The Knight of the Holy See concentrated on his task, rubbed his hands together, bent forward and clasped the boulder, wrapping his arms around it as much as he could. He took the strain and, achingly slowly, he stood up.

Then he walked. One staggering step at a time.

After ten steps he yelled out as his muscles began to quiver in exhaustion.

'Come on. Muller,' he cajoled himself.

Another step. And another.

Finally, with a cry of frustration, he dropped the massive rock and fell to his knees.

He had just walked a dozen steps, in the deep snow carrying a boulder weighing well over a thousand pounds.

A feat that was technically impossible for a human being to achieve.

Ben allowed himself to be seen.

'Master,' greeted the Knight.

'Muller. You have done well.'

'Thank you.'

'You know how to meditate?' asked the Master.

'I meditate through prayer.'

'Fine. Spend rest of the day doing so. Open mind. Accept all round you. Become one with it. Do until I give further instructions.'

'Yes, Master. Will that be later today?'

Ben raised an eyebrow. 'I will see you in few weeks. Remember, every day, out here in snow. Open your mind.'

He disappeared.

***

Troy sat cross legged on the ground. The drifting snow piled up on his shoulders, the top of his head and all around him to a depth of a couple of feet.

He did not move. His eyes were closed and the only sign of life was the occasional plume of vapor as he breathed out.

Ben brought his staff down hard.

But Troy blocked the blow with ease, throwing his right arm up and deflecting the staff past him.

He did not open his eyes.

He did not move.

Ben Chu smiled and vanished from sight.

***

The Master contemplated Tag with an expression that looked to be a combination of awe and confusion.

Three weeks before, Ben had set the big man a task that was impossible to achieve. He had to catch a pebble falling from a tree over fifty yards away. To accomplish this goal, he would have to cover the ground, while wading through the snow, in under two seconds.

He had not been able to do so.

However, he was close. Mere inches away.

He had somehow managed to increase his speed to something approaching three times that of an Olympic sprinter.

The Master was thinking on how Tag had achieved this when he became aware of someone standing behind him. He turned to see the

Prof.

'How you do that?' asked Ben.

'What?'

'Sneak up on me like that. Is not possible.'

'Obviously it is, old chap,' returned the Prof as he took out his pipe and lit it with a small conjured flame. 'And anyway, I wasn't sneaking, I was simply coming to see Tag. Remarkable specimen, isn't he?'

'Specimen?'

'Yes, you know, subject, specimen. Experiment, I suppose.'

'He not your friend?' asked Ben.

The Prof puffed his pipe and thought for a moment. 'Yes. I suppose he very well might be.' He looked surprised. 'Well, I never. Who would have thought?'

'He most definitely conundrum,' acknowledged Ben.

The Prof chuckled. 'Tag is more than that,' he said. 'He is an enigma, wrapped in a conundrum and placed inside a puzzle box. His biology and his mental makeup are quite extraordinary. You know, before I started experimenting on him, he was just a normal chap. Well, as normal as Tag could ever be. But now, super healing ability, super strength and, as far as I can make out, super speed.'

'How?'

The Prof shrugged. 'No idea. I have injected, and he has ingested so many different potions that I have lost track. Awful of me, I know, but sometimes I get overexcited.'

The two stood in silence for a while.

'I need ask a favor of you,' said Ben Chu.

'Fire away.'

'I want you teach Tag magic.'

The Prof laughed. 'Can't be done,' he said.

'Why?'

'The chap has the attention span of a squirrel.'

'Yet here he is, after three grueling weeks, still doing same thing. Improving every day,' pointed out Ben.

Again, they simply watched. Thinking.

'When I set Tag task,' said Ben. 'I also told him contemplate question. How can feet smell and noses run?'

The Prof chuckled again. 'Poor chap, there's obviously no answer to that. Why'd you do it?'

'To clear mind. I told him ponder question while he attempted task. Here my deal, if he able to answer question, you try to teach him?'

The Prof frowned. 'It is an unanswerable question. But, yes, if he could.'

Ben called out to the big man, beckoning for him to come over.

Tag jogged up. Hi, Master. Prof.'

The Prof nodded. ‘Greetings … friend.’ He smiled.

‘You done well, my pupil,’ said Ben. ‘Now, you considered question?’

‘Yes, Master.’

‘And what your answer?’

‘Master, if your feet can smell and your nose can run – you are most probably hanging upside down.’

Nobody spoke for a few seconds.

Then the Prof laughed. ‘Fine,’ he said. ‘I shall, teach him. Or at very least, I shall try.’

Ben bowed low,

And vanished.

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CHAPTER 16

‘I am a monster,’ said Mikael Trotsky. ‘And it is his fault.’

The hideously deformed vampire accepted a Cuban cigar from his host. He eschewed a cigar cutter and bit the end off instead. Then he produced his own Zippo and put the cigar to flame.

Kievan Romanoff did his best to look his guest in the eye and not shudder. After all, it would not behoove the head of House Romanoff to exhibit such crass emotions.

‘In what way?’ he asked Trotsky, genuinely curious as to why the monster hated Belikov so much.

‘I was living with a small group of brethren in a village close to Vladivostok. I was happy. We hunted at night, entertained. The locals served us well. But then the Blood King called me. He wanted me to bring my clan and join him at his palace next to the Pipyat River. Just outside of Chernobyl.

‘None of us wanted to go. But the Blood King is very powerful. And vindictive. So, we went.

‘We arrived on April the 16th, 1986,’ said Trotsky. ‘Ten days later, Chernobyl had a meltdown.’ He dragged heavily on his cigar. Then he gestured towards his own face. The mushroom-like growths, the rough flaps of wattled skin, the dark gray and livid purple ridges. ‘I became what you now see before you.

‘A grotesque. A side show freak. Something fit only to hide in the shadows like some deformed Hyena.

‘He must pay. The Blood King must pay for what he did to me and my clan.’

Romanoff frowned. ‘That is all well and good, comrade,’ he said. ‘But we are talking about the *Krov Tsar*. Even to whisper the words you are saying is a death penalty. True death.’

‘He has his weaknesses,’ insisted Trotsky. ‘His arrogance, for one. He has no idea how much he relies on his second, Jebe Zurgadai. The man is meant to be his friend, but he treats him more as a pet. A dog to be patted on the head when he begs for a treat.

‘Also, he cannot comprehend that anyone would turn against him. His conceit is so large he considers himself untouchable. We can exploit that. All we need is to remove Jebe from the picture for a short while. Or permanently, I don’t care. I am personal friends with a number of Belikov’s guards, trust me, there is no love lost there. I will ensure they are looking the other way, then we strike. Behead the

Blood King and offer his body to the rising sun.'

'Yes, I see,' remarked Romanoff. 'But where does house Romanoff fit into this audacious plan of yours?'

'I will need backup,' answered Trotsky. 'House Belikov is divided. The Blood King rules through intimidation and fear.'

'Don't we all?' interjected Romanoff.

'Yes, of course,' conceded Trotsky. 'But the better leaders temper that with respect. The brethren will always follow a Master that engenders both fear *and* respect. Belikov is all fear.

'But to fully answer your question, I need a team of your best warriors. Masters, or Ancients at least. Because you must not forget, although we at house Belikov have been cursed with repulsiveness, we have also been blessed with great physical speed and strength.

'Give me twenty of your best. And then have the rest of your people waiting for my call. As soon as we have destroyed the Blood King, you will swoop in and validate my rule over house Belikov.

'It will become, house Trotsky.'

'What is in it for me?' asked Romanoff.

'We would have a formal agreement as allies,' answered Trotsky. 'Also, we would get rid of the Blood King who seeks to join all *Nosferatu* under his banner. We both know that is an unnatural existence for our kind. It will never work.'

'Yet you propose an alliance,' argued Romanoff.

'That is different. The brethren have often had loose alliances. As long as it benefits both houses, it is acceptable. But to kowtow to a single ruler.' Trotsky shook his monstrous head. 'No. I spit on the Blood King and his aspirations.'

'Let me think on your proposal,' countered Romanoff. 'I shall take council with my people and get back to you. Meanwhile, please treat my house as your own. We have a new batch of food, teenagers fresh from the Ukraine. Help yourself.'

Trotsky stood. 'I give thanks,' he said as he left the room.

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CHAPTER 17

Kick. Switch legs. Jump. Kick. Repeat. A hundred, a thousand, ten thousand times.

The ice crackled on Emily's thin linen shirt and pants. The wind whipped her ponytail from side to side and the snow swirled around her like a crystal dust storm.

Kick.

Kick.

Every movement was perfect. Even though the tree stump was coated in ice, her feet did not slip.

The sun rose.

The sun set.

She had been doing the exact something for twelve hours a day, seven days a week, for six weeks.

Breath in.

Breath out.

Every kick expelled a little more of her anger. Her frustration. And slowly, incrementally, the level of rage in her system lessened.

And on the afternoon of the forty-second day - Emily stopped.

And she smiled.

She jumped down from the stump and began to walk back to the house.

'I can see you,' she said.

Ben Chu chuckled. 'That is pleasing. And unusual. Why have you stopped? The sun has at least three more hours before it retires.'

'I have finished doing that,' answered Emily.

'What have you finished doing?' asked the Master.

'Fighting nothing. Fighting everything. I have finished standing on an icy tree stump in the snow and kicking at emptiness.'

'Why?'

'Because I have come to a realization,' answered Emily.

'And what is that?'

Emily stopped walking and turned to face the Master. 'I have come to realize that for the past ten weeks, I have been fighting myself.'

Ben smiled. Then he bowed. 'Well done, student,' he said. 'Go back to the abode. Eat. Rest. We shall talk again tomorrow.'

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CHAPTER 18

Another six months passed in folded space. All in all, the team of hunters had spent just over a month in Real World time.

The last couple of folded space months, Ben Chu had drilled them in their basics. Kata, swordplay, unarmed combat, archery and firearms. Even some explosives work.

As well as these skills he continued to coach each member in the areas he felt they needed most work.

There was no doubt that the four of them were now in the best shape they had ever been. Both mentally and physically.

Tag was also the most frustrated he had ever been.

The Prof had taken him for four hours every day and tutored him in the skills of basic magic.

Meditation, concentration and contemplation.

'Enough *Om Mani Padme Hum*,' Tag said loudly. 'I wanna get to the *Flame On* part of this stuff.'

The Prof looked puzzled. 'What you are doing has nothing in common with the Sanskrit mantra associated with the four-armed Shadakshari form of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion,' he said. 'The exercises I am teaching you are all to do with concentration of power, not the realization of empathy.'

Tag frowned. 'Sure, Prof,' he acknowledged. 'I have no idea what most of the words in that sentence meant. All I'm saying is, how much longer do I have to keep doing this meditation before I can burn stuff?'

'Forever,' answered the Prof. 'It must become a daily habit. You need to surpass the first level in order to be able to draw upon the latent power of the universe. Until then, no *Flame On*. Not even *Small Spark On*. Continue, big man. But do not feel discouraged, already you are further down the path than you think.'

The rest of the team grinned at Tag's discomfort.

'Listen up, people,' interjected Merlin. 'It's been a month out there, and it's time to get back in the saddle. I've collected some info and have a couple of *Nosferatu* Houses we need to strike. Gather round the table and I will lay it all out for you.'

'What about me?' asked Tag. 'I can't even light a cigarette with my magic.'

'Yeah, but you can burn a house down with Missus Jones,' offered Troy.

Tag smiled. ‘That be true and all, but truth be told, I’m looking to do things in a more cereal way from now on.’

‘Cereal?’ asked Emily.

‘Sure, you know, using your brain instead of your brawn.’

‘Oh, cerebral.’

‘That’s what I said.’

‘Tag,’ said Merlin. ‘You can work your way up to that. For now, you are the big man with a bigger stick. Got it?’

Tag nodded. ‘Got it.’

Emily turned to thank Master Ben for all he had done. But there was no sign of him.

‘Master?’ she called out. ‘Where is he?’

‘His work is done,’ answered Merlin. ‘And Ben has never been one for goodbyes. I am sure you shall see him again, sometime soon.’

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CHAPTER 19

The team of hunters drove through Italy, Switzerland and Lichtenstein to get to the city of Fussen in Germany.

Tag and Troy ate their own weight in pasta in Italy, consumed almost a metric ton of cheese in Switzerland and came to a mutual decision that Lichtenstein was a good place to catch up on their MacDonald's deficiency.

Not that they didn't like the food. It was more that the food in Lichtenstein was the gastronomic equivalent of eating wood glue. The Liechtensteiner's two most popular dishes appeared to be either *Kasknopfle*, a hand grenade sized boiled dumpling made from what seemed to be paper mâché, or *Ribel*, which was a dry version of the same thing.

The team stood on the balcony of the chalet Merlin had rented for them. It was a large, log walled affair with floor to ceiling windows, hot tubs, state of the art entertainment, luxurious beds and soft furnishings. It overlooked the mountains, and the large village of Grote, situated some ten miles from the city of Fussen. Almost directly opposite them, on the other side of the valley, loomed a gigantic castle.

Schloss Heilberg. The residence of Count Frank Kraupner. Head of one of the larger German *Nosferatu* houses.

'I know it's beautiful,' said Troy. 'But for some reason I'm sick of snowy mountain vistas.'

Both Emily and Muller snorted in agreement.

'What about you, big guy?' asked Troy.

'*Om Mani Padme Hum,*' answered Tag as he held in hands together in front of his chest in an attitude of prayer.

'Seriously?' asked Emily.

'I am one with the view,' said Tag. 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and as such, all looks jaded to one who is not traveling the way.'

The team stared at the big man, open mouthed.

Tag burst out laughing. 'Just trying the whole spiritual enlightenment thing on for size,' he explained. 'Personally, not sure about it. Makes me sound like a walking fortune cookie. Also, mountains, snow, bleagh. Still, hopefully the Germans got better food than those dudes who ate wallpaper paste.'

'I think you will find German food to be very much to your liking,'

interjected Merlin.

'Why? What is it?' asked Tag.

'Pig mainly. Sausages, roast pork, meatballs. Also, potato. And cabbage.'

'Do I have to eat the cabbage?'

'You don't have to eat anything you don't want to,' replied Merlin.

Tag grinned, as did Troy.

'Happy days,' noted the big man.

'When do we hit the castle?' asked Emily.

'Tonight,' answered the Prof. 'I have it on good information that the Count is having a ball. Very high society. We are all going.'

'Is it a plus one?' asked Tag.

'Why?' asked the Prof.

'Just wanna know if I can take missus Jones.'

Merlin shook his head. 'Most definitely not. It's all tuxedos, ball gowns and concealed weapons, I'm afraid.'

'Will any of those BUMF's be there?' asked Troy. 'You know, those Big Ugly Motherf…'

Merlin shrugged. 'Who knows? I hope not, although I doubt it very much. The German *Nosferatu* hate the Russians with a passion.'

'I don't want to sound like a cliché,' interjected Emily. 'But I don't have anything to wear.'

'You do,' corrected Merlin. 'As do the boys.'

'How?'

The wizard wiggled his fingers.

'That might prove to become rather annoying,' mumbled Emily under her breath.

'What about invitations?' asked Muller. 'We can't just walk up and gatecrash.'

'Actually, that is exactly what we are going to do,' said Merlin. 'All of us, including the Prof. You see, the Count doesn't require proof of invite, after all, who would gatecrash the party of one of the most powerful men in the area?'

'Us,' said the Prof.

***

Emily looked at the four men and grinned. 'My, don't you lot scrub up well,' she noted.

And to be fair, they did. Troy with his dark looks, wide shoulders and shoulder length hair. Muller's natural grace that made his muscular build seem lighter than it actually was. Tag - a tank in a dress suit. Merlin looked the business, his silver hair in a ponytail and his beard plaited into a fork.

But the biggest surprise was the Prof. Emily was used to thinking of

him as a rangy, bumbling, slightly incoherent scholar. But somehow, the tux had brought out something in him. He stood straighter, topping six feet. His shoulders tapered down to a slim waist and his bright blue eyes glowed with power and otherworldly intelligence. He looked, presidential.

Troy held out his arm and Emily took it.

She was wearing a deep red, figure hugging silk ball gown with a black leather bodice over the top. A combination of Cinderella meets Goth. And it worked.

As Tag had said – she looked hot enough to fry chicken on.

Together, the team mounted the steps that led to the entrance of the castle.

A set of massive oak double doors were pushed open to allow access to the palatial entrance hall. Guards in black leather, with long black cloaks, stood on each side of the door as well as in the entrance hall. At least twenty of them. They all carried what appeared to be ceremonial swords. But on closer inspection Emily could tell the swords were real. And it was obvious to her that every one of the guards was *Nosferatu*. Not high level, but dangerous enough.

'Blood suckers,' she communicated to Troy, using her pack link as opposed to her vocal cords.

Troy nodded. 'I know,' he responded.

One of the guards detached himself from the line and approached them.

'Greetings on behalf of Count Kraupner,' he said. 'Please follow me to the ballroom.'

The team traipsed after the vamp guard, noting the extreme opulence of the place as they walked.

They heard the music long before they arrived at the ballroom. Emily was surprised at the genre. She had expected a string quartet, or maybe even a chamber orchestra. Whatever, classical music for sure.

Instead, the strains of swing filled the air.

'The King Porter Stomp,' commented Emily. 'Benny Goodman and his orchestra. Got to number 16 on the hit parade in 1935.' She shrugged and looked slightly embarrassed. 'Sorry. Habit.'

Troy chuckled. 'Walking Google-nerd.'

The guard stopped and bowed, ushering them into the ballroom.

The place was a riot of color. Eighty or so guests were dancing, schmoozing, drinking, talking.

The Count was immediately apparent to every member of the team. His aura made him stand out like a volcano in the Garden of Eden. A destructive force of note.

'An Ancient,' mumbled Emily.

'And a powerful one at that,' agreed Merlin. 'Everyone, stay well

clear of the Count for now. He will know who, or at least what we are the moment he sets eyes on us. Let's see if we can stay under the radar for now while we check out the lay of the land. It looks like a large proportion of the people here are simply guests. I see the mayor over there, judging from the mayoral chain around his neck. Not sure who is in the know regarding the Count's real identity, and who are mere villagers looking to do a bit of social climbing.

'For the moment we shall consider everyone present as one of the enemy. Come on people, mingle with a purpose.'

Tag walked straight over to the large finger buffet, grabbed a plate and began loading up.

The Prof joined him. 'What looks good?' he asked.

Tag shrugged. 'They got loads of fish eggs. Tiny little pie things with mush in them. Stuff on little biscuits. Honest? It's all not good. What's wrong with chicken legs and pizza slices? I'm sure no one really likes this fancy-shmanshy food. Just trying to be posh instead of feeding the guests.'

He shoveled a handful of canapes into his mouth and chewed.

The Prof helped himself to a generous mound of caviar and water crackers.

A waiter appeared and offered a tray of pink champagne in crystal flutes. Tag took one, downed it, grabbed the waiter by the shoulder to stop him leaving and then proceeded to polish off the rest of the tray, except for one flute that he handed to the Prof.

'You like champagne,' noted the Prof.

'Meh. It's fizzy,' said Tag. 'Prefer beer.'

'You, sir,' noted the Prof. 'Are a cultural barbarian.'

Tag chuckled. 'I likes what I likes.' He finished off the plate of food, handed it to a passing waiter and set off towards the dancefloor. 'Tag's gonna cut the rug,' he said. 'Time to boogie on down. I wonder if these jokers know any Reggae?'

The Prof watched the big man go, and then he scooped up another mound of Beluga.

Meanwhile, Emily found herself surrounded by men. Some young, some old.

Some human.

Mainly vampires.

She looked at the crowd of disgusting leeches around her, and for the first time since she had been turned, the tsunami of hatred didn't rise up and threaten to overwhelm her senses.

In the back of her mind, she heard Master Ben's calm voice.

'Balance. There is light, and there is dark. Both are necessary. Remember, there is no reason to fight against that which is part of you. Accept it. Embrace it. But do not let it control you.'

Emily smiled. ‘Gentlemen,’ she cooed. ‘I wonder if one of you might get me a flute of champagne?’

The stampede of men rushing to cater to her whim was a sight to behold.

Troy hid a smile as he strolled over to a group of three older ladies who were chatting earnestly about some inane subject. He sensed immediately that they were all human and he bowed low as he introduced himself.

‘Good evening, ladies,’ he growled. ‘I am Troy Omega; may I enquire as to your names? I’m new to these parts, I hope you don’t mind me intruding on your private conversation.’

As one, they all curtsied to him, taking in his golden eyes, flowing locks, athletic build and rough shaven appearance.

‘La, sir,’ gasped the one. ‘I would take offence if you didn’t intrude.’

The others all giggled and fluttered their eyelashes, reduced to the state of tittering schoolgirls by the sledgehammer of Troy’s blatant lupine sexuality.

Muller stood next to Merlin, sipping on a mineral water. Merlin had somehow managed to get a full glass of whisky, despite no one else having any.

‘This lot aren’t exactly suited for undercover work,’ noted the Knight.

Merlin chuckled. ‘No. Tag is like a massive hellhound in a suit, and as for Troy and Emily, they are both extremely difficult to ignore. You do okay.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Muller. ‘I am a holy man. I’m used to blending into the background. The church is important, the individual is not. I must say, I am surprised you do not attract more attention.’

‘I have subdued my aura,’ said Merlin. ‘It’s a simple exercise. Ben Chu uses it all the time.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Whenever he disappears,’ answered Merlin. ‘He’s not teleporting or anything like that, he simply becomes so uninteresting, your brain glosses over him. He becomes part of the surrounds. But he’s still there. Then he just walks away.’

Muller smiled. ‘Crafty bugger. I thought he moved through time and space or something equally as impressive. Not some parlor trick.’

‘Oh, if he needed to move through time and space, he could,’ said Merlin. ‘Ben is one of the more powerful beings you shall ever meet. But, on the whole, he uses what you call a parlor trick.’ Merlin sighed. ‘What is Tag doing?’

‘I believe he is boogying on down,’ interjected the Prof who had just walked over, carrying a plate full of caviar.

‘I think the Count is watching him,’ noted Muller.

‘Not a huge problem,’ said Merlin. ‘He’s not going to get much of a read off the big man, except for the fact that he wasn’t invited.’

Sure enough, they looked on as the Count beckoned to one of the guards, calling him to his side. A quick word in his ear and the vampire guard made his way across the ballroom, heading towards Tag.

He reached Tag, tapped him on the shoulder and asked a question.

None of them heard the question, but they all heard the answer.

‘I’m a friend of someone who knows one of the gatecrashers,’ he blurted out.

Merlin shook his head. ‘Here we go,’ he said. ‘There are times when I’m not quite sure if that boy is a human being, or some sort of ambulatory wrecking ball.’ Concentrating on the various members of the team, the wizard pulsed out a thought. ‘Prepare yourselves, the proverbial is about to hit the fan in a big way.’

The Count stood up and all about him could feel the power of his aura as he unleashed the full influence of his glamor. Some of the human guests fell to their knees as the glamor stripped their capacity to resist. Others wept openly and still more simply froze, like rabbits in the headlights.

‘Bring that man here,’ he boomed.

The vampire next to the big man grasped him by the arm and, applying his superhuman strength, pulled him towards the Count.

Tag didn’t budge. Not an inch.

The vampire looked puzzled and tried again, this time putting visible effort into it.

Still, nothing. It was like trying to drag a mountain.

Then, with a grin, Tag allowed himself to be steered towards the vampiric Count. In fact, in a reversal of roles, as he walked and dragged the guard along with him.

Stopping in front of the Count he nodded a greeting. ‘Wassuup, Count?’

‘Who are you?’ asked the Count.

Tag frowned. ‘Who are you?’ he returned.

The Count sneered at the big man. Then he beckoned to a brace of extra guards. ‘Take him away.’

As they approached Tag, the Count smiled at his guests, projecting feelings of relief, belonging and contentment.

The three vamp guards surrounded Tag, two of them grabbing an arm each.

Tag smiled at them and then shook his head. ‘No way,’ he said. ‘I don’t think so.’

Troy bowed to the trio of ladies he was talking to. ‘If you will excuse me,’ he said. ‘I think things are about to get rather frantic, and

I feel I shall be involved.'

He bowed again and then moved, crossing the room in under a second to bring himself alongside Tag.

He got there just in time to observe Tag explode into action. The big man's new found speed was a sight to behold. He was faster than he had ever been. But unfortunately, he still wasn't quite as fast as a vampire.

That still didn't stop him literally tearing the arms off one of the guards before the other two hit him. One pulled out his sword and hammered it into Tag's stomach, twisting the blade savagely before pulling it out.

The second vamp drew a small, silenced pistol, placed it against Tag's wide back and pulled the trigger twice.

Troy assumed the reason the vamps were using weapons as opposed to fangs, was an attempt to keep their true identities secret from the general populace of the village.

Tag dropped to one knee.

The Count's voice boomed out once again as he flexed his glamor, using it to subdue the panicked screams and shouts of surprise, fear and disgust.

'Please, good people, be calm,' he commanded. 'Ignore what you have just seen. It is merely an uninvited guest. He is of no moment to us. Carry on with the festivities while my servants clear up.'

'Clear this up, asswipe,' grunted Tag as he stood up, grabbed the two vamp guards and slammed them together so hard the sound of the bones breaking was clearly audible across the room.

Then he pulled open his bloody jacket, drew his two Desert Eagles and shot both vamps three times in the face.

That's when the entire party went to hell in a handbasket.

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CHAPTER 20

Vamp guards appeared like magic, using their blinding speed to descend upon Tag. Ten, twenty, more.

At the same time, Troy launched himself into the fray, bursting through his tux as he went full wolfman in the blink of an eye.

The Count responded by barking out a string of orders that resulted in the waiters drawing out tiny Sig Sauer Copperhead submachineguns.

Another command caused the vampire guests to instantly extend their fangs and ready themselves to join the battle.

Emily, who was surrounded by at least six vamps doing their best to woo her, called on Deathwalker and, with a flourish of her wrists, beheaded two of them before they realized what was happening.

Muller's sawn-off shotgun appeared in his hands and the double boom of its discharge thundered across the room.

The Count's eyes went blood red and his canines sprang from his mouth as he jumped high in the air, leaping towards Emily.

Half way to her, he met a crackling ball of white-hot plasma Merlin had thrown at him. It exploded with a wave of fire, burning the Count's clothes and singeing his hair. But, being an ancient, it was little more than a distraction.

Which is exactly what Merlin meant it to be.

The Count twisted in the air and landed, cat-like on his feet. As he did so, Emily was waiting. Deathwalker swung, but the Count swayed backwards, lashing out with a kick as he did.

Emily rode the blow, stepping backwards as it landed, then she spun hard, bringing the double-bladed ax around in a circle, first high and then low.

The Count, drawing on his thousands of years of combat experience, evaded the attack with relative ease.

The two ultimate warriors circled each other, looking for an opening.

Meanwhile, the Prof, still holding a plate of caviar, snagged a passing waiter, ripped his submachinegun off him and put a quick burst into his chest. Then, with barely a pause, he lined up another and squeezed off a couple more bursts. Unfortunately, the second one went a little wide and stitched its way across the mayor's corpulent gut.

'Oops,' exclaimed the Prof.

Merlin looked at him and scowled.

‘Not my fault,’ argued the Prof. ‘Stupid thing pulls to the left. The manufacturers obviously tried to put too much gun into too small a frame.’

‘Use your magic, darn it,’ shouted Merlin.

‘Just trying to learn something new,’ stated the Prof with a huff, as he wound up a mini-tornado and sent it forth, bowling over three of the submachinegun wielding waiters.

No longer under the effects of the Count’s glamor, the guests were running around like headless chickens. Squawking and screaming and falling down. The battle was fast turning into a circus. All it needed was a toy car full of clowns, a couple of jugglers, and a ringmaster.

Tag was using his new-found speed to full effect, dashing from one side of the ballroom to the other, shooting vamps in the face, overturning furniture, smashing glasses and generally creating utter havoc and mayhem.

He was also shouting at the same time. ‘Just you wait until I get my Flame On magic. Gonna burn you all to the ground. But right now, you gonna have to settle with a bullet inna face.’

Another ten vampire guards ran into the ballroom.

‘Goodness me,’ exclaimed the Prof. ‘There seems to be a never-ending supply of these miscreants. Well, I never.’

He launched a storm of ice shards at the newcomers. The flurry of razor-sharp ice cut the vamps to shreds. Their healing went into overdrive, but before they could fully restore themselves, Merlin cast a swarm of miniature fireballs that rained down on them like molten hail, hissing and fizzing as they burned through flesh and bone.

Then, with a twist of his hand, Merlin pulled the molten balls to one side, cutting through the fallen vampires like red-hot scythes. With another twist, he sent them strafing back.

No amount of self-healing could keep up with the massive quantities of fiery damage the Master wizard was dealing out, and the entire group of vampires met with the true death.

Muller was using his new found strength to its full ability. After he had emptied his shotgun, three vamps immediately attacked him. Instead of drawing his sword from its concealed shoulder holster, he grabbed the first vamp by his arm and, with a mighty heave, swung him over his head and slammed him down onto the other two attackers.

‘Vampire whack-a-mole,’ shouted Tag from across the room. ‘Nice one, Muller.’

Before Muller could answer Tag, a group of at least six more vampires dog-piled the big man and he went down in a welter of blood and torn clothing.

Troy jumped to his assistance, roaring and howling as his powerful jaws ripped into the pile of vampires.

Merlin and the Prof continued to tag-team any armed waiters, or vampires they could see.

Emily and the Count continued their dance of death. Unlike the general mayhem the rest of the team were creating, Emily and the Ancient hardly moved. There were full seconds of study and then microseconds of actual combat. Followed by another gap where they both considered each other, searching for some sort of gap or weakness to exploit.

For any normal humans watching it would seem that the two combatants would stand still, disappear into a blur for the blink of an eye and then reappear.

It was close to evenly matched.

Close. But not completely even.

Emily was just that bit faster. Just that bit stronger.

And even though the Count had hundreds of years of combat experience under his belt, Emily had her Shadowhunter training, as well as the knowledge of the Pack, handed down from member to member.

Again, and again, they clashed and withdrew. And each time they did so, blood would spray across the room.

None of it was Emily's.

Finally, the Count stopped and held his right hand up.

'Enough,' he said. 'I find myself hopelessly outclassed.' He glanced around the wreckage of his previously opulent ballroom. 'And your ham-fisted companions have destroyed my ballroom.' He pointed at a large, wrecked oil painting. It was so smashed up it was impossible to tell what it had been mere minutes earlier. 'That was a Rembrandt,' he continued. 'Painted in 1642. He gave it to me himself. This is most upsetting. I wonder, could you tell them to stop demolishing everything?'

Emily shook her head.

'Thought as much,' said the Count. 'I take it I am facing the Daywalker?'

'Yes.'

'Until now, I always thought you were a rumor. Beautiful young girl with the power of the *Nosferatu*, the strength of a werewolf and the combat techniques of a Shadowhunter. Seems rather unfair.'

As the Count talked, the battle around them slowly dwindled to a stop. Relative silence interrupted by a heaving sob from one of the few surviving human guests. Then the odd frighteningly loud boom of one of Tag's Desert Eagles as he strolled about, administering the *Coup de Gras* to any vampire who had not yet found the true death.

The Count looked at Emily and smiled. ‘I don’t suppose there’s a chance of us coming to some sort of deal?’

Emily shook her head. And the look the Count saw in her eyes made it plain that he was already living on borrowed time.

Tag swaggered up, his tux was in shreds, and what remained was soaked in his blood. ‘Hey, I’m finished shooting all the vamps inna face,’ he said. ‘Why don’t you off this guy quickly so we can check out the rest of the place. I’m sure there must be more of them.’

The rest of the team gathered around.

The Count looked at Merlin for a few seconds and then he nodded. ‘Wizard. I heard you were dead,’ he said.

‘The rumors were vastly exaggerated,’ said Merlin.

The Count continued to peruse the team. ‘Muller the Pious. The Omega wolf. Ah, greetings, Professor.’

The Prof scowled. ‘Speak not to me, foul denizen of the darkest depths.’

‘Same old Prof, I see,’ scoffed the Count.

The Prof turned his back and walked away.

‘So, what now?’ asked the Count.

Muller stepped forward, a flask of Holy Water in his hand.

‘The power of Christ compels me.’

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CHAPTER 21

The Count died screaming.

Emily forced herself to stay and watch. It was important to her that she faced the consequences of her actions.

In a surprising display of vehemence, the Prof spat on the remains of the Ancient vampire and cursed his name.

Merlin called for calm, then he closed his eyes, concentrated and cast a spell. A visible ripple of rainbow colors spread out, like oil on water. A few seconds later he opened his eyes.

'Grinders,' he said. 'In the dungeons. At least twenty. Also, more vampires. They're spread all over the castle. Small groups, some alone. We should split up. Muller and Tag, that way,' Merlin pointed. 'Take the entire wing, start on the first floor and work up. Troy, you go that way and do the same. Emily, towards the rear of the castle. The Prof and I will tackle the center.

'But before we do, we need to get these civilians out of here.' Using a spell to raise the volume and command of his voice, Merlin addressed the few humans who had not already run from the castle. 'People,' he boomed. 'I would advise you to leave as quickly as possible. This is not over. And while I'm busy with advice, if I were you, I wouldn't bother reporting this incident to the authorities. In the past I have found that telling the police about vampires and werewolves and fire throwing wizards tends to result in little action and even less belief.' He pointed at the mayor who was currently getting some magical help from the Prof. 'Also, someone help the mayor. He appears to have suffered an injury. Get him to a doctor as soon as you can.'

The Prof looked up from his ministrations. 'Not to worry,' he said. 'I think I've sorted it. Got the slugs out and healed up the wounds. He'll be in some pain for a while, but should pull through. Eventually. I think. Maybe.'

Two middle aged men helped the mayor to his feet and walked him from the room.

The rest of the guests followed; their faces resigned. Blank with relief that for them, it was over.

One of the women Troy had been chatting to, turned to look at the wolfman. Then she smiled and waved.

Troy pulled his lips back to reveal his teeth and growled.

The woman giggled, turned and left.

Emily rolled her eyes at the wolfman. ‘Really?’

He shrugged. ‘Can’t help it. Naturally irresistible.’

Tag laughed and high fived the wolfman.

‘Okay, people,’ interjected Merlin. ‘A lot of ground to cover, let’s move.’

***

Emily strode through the meandering stone corridors that wended their way towards the rear wing of the castle. This was obviously an area of the *schloss* mostly frequented by the servants. Little to no ornamentation, naked light bulbs, barely enough heating to keep ice from forming on the stone.

Using all of her senses, she mentally quested ahead, seeking the presence of any other living beings. She could feel human auras. They were weak. Almost imperceptible. But further away, bright seething auras of the *Nosferatu*. Some more powerful than others.

One in particular stood out like a beacon. Oddly, although she could sense it was a vampire, it lacked the usual feeling of cruelty she associated with the average blood sucker.

One of the side doors opened and two humans walked out. Both were dressed in casual clothes, a man and a woman. They were chatting, oblivious to the mayhem that had just transpired in the ballroom.

The man looked up at Emily. ‘Are you lost? You aren’t allowed in this part of the *schloss*.’

‘Who are you?’ asked Emily.

The man sneered. ‘That is my business. Now, answer my question, what are you doing here? The Master will be most displeased to find any of his guests wandering about without an escort.’

The woman, who had been staring closely at Emily, let out a gasp. ‘Is that blood?’ she asked, pointing at the scarlet smear running down the side of Emily’s bodice.

Emily raised an eyebrow, but didn’t answer.

‘Is it from feeding?’ enquired the woman, her voice catching slightly in obvious fear.

‘Maybe,’ countered Emily.

Both of the humans fell to their knees, slamming their foreheads against the cold stone floor as they kowtowed frantically.

‘Forgive my tone, mistress,’ groveled the man. ‘I had no idea.’

‘So,’ said Emily. ‘You know what goes on here?’

‘Yes, mistress,’ whined the female familiar. ‘We serve at your whim. Please, we meant no offence.’

‘And you are okay with the blood of innocent villagers being spent?’ continued Emily.

‘Of course, mistress,’ answered the male familiar. ‘As the Master has oft told us, they are but meat. Cattle for the slaughter.’

Emily shook her head. ‘You know, I sometimes think that you familiars may be worse than the actual blood suckers. Some of them were turned without choice. But you. You chose to follow this disgusting, cruel and unforgivable way of life.’

She brought forth Deathwalker.

One fell swoop took off both their heads, and a new smear of blood was added to Emily’s clothing.

She continued her search, walking down the seemingly endless corridor, senses alert. Seeking.

Two more familiars were dispatched and one lower-level vamp before she approached the powerful aura she sensed earlier. She slowed down as she got closer, and finally, she stopped before a plain wooden door to the left of the corridor. It was exactly the same as all the other doors. Nothing fancy. No sign on it. No cleaner than any of the others.

Nothing different.

Except for the blazing aura of power that emanated from behind it.

Emily decided to go for shock and awe and simply kicked it in. The door flew off its hinges and spun across the room, smashing into the opposite wall.

Stepping in, she saw walls covered in shelves, filled with ancient tomes. On her right, a small desk. Sitting behind the desk, a slight, silver haired man, dressed in an old-fashioned three-piece suit. His hair was slicked back and he sported a small goatee beard and pencil moustache. His eyes were so pale blue as to be almost colorless.

He was obviously a vampire.

Looking up from his book, he smiled.

To Emily, the smile looked genuine. Like an uncle seeing his favorite niece who seldom calls. It was at odds with the fact she knew him to be a *Nosferatu*.

‘Ah, yes,’ he said. ‘I wondered when you would appear. I felt many powerful auras, but yours stood out like torchlight in a dungeon.’

Emily didn’t answer. Nor did she equip Deathwalker. At the moment, even though the vampire exuded power, he did not project danger. If any emotion came across, it was regret.

‘Forgive my rudeness,’ continued the vampire, as he stood up and bowed. ‘I am doctor Gunter von Bless, at your service, madam.’

Still Emily did not answer. Instead, she cautiously approached the vampire, noting his body language, deciding how much of a threat he actually was. After a few seconds she made her decision, stepped forward and sat down in the chair opposite his desk.

‘Emily Hawk,’ she introduced herself.

‘Delighted, miss Hawk,’ replied the Doctor as he sat back down. ‘So, I assume after all the cessation of life I sense from upstairs, you have come to kill me.’

‘You cannot kill that which has no life,’ answered Emily.

‘Really?’ frowned the Doctor. ‘What a narrow view you must have of life. *Cogito ergo sum.* I think, therefore I am. Surely that belief is certain and irrefutable.’

‘I am not here to debate philosophy.’

‘No, you are here to end me.’

‘Not you specifically. All of your type.’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘It is what you do. So, do it.’ He stood up and walked around the desk.

Emily flowed to her feet.

The Doctor knelt in front of her. ‘Make it quick,’ he said.

Emily nodded and brought forth Deathwalker.

‘You know,’ said the Doctor. ‘I never wanted to be a child of the night. I was turned against my will some eight hundred years ago. Unfortunately, in all that time I have been too cowardly to take my own life. Or end my existence as you would put it. So, I became a recluse. Living in the servant’s quarters with my books. A life of self-exile.’

‘Are you trying to tell me you are the victim here?’ scoffed Emily.

‘Why not?’

‘What do you live on?’

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. ‘You know we need human blood to survive. It is not a choice.’

‘I know,’ said Emily. ‘I have felt it. The hunger is impossible to resist.’

The Doctor looked up at her. He smiled again. ‘I thought as much. It is you. The Daywalker. So, you know of the hunger.’

‘Yes.’

‘And still, you wish to end me?’

‘It is because of the hunger that I need to end you,’ answered Emily. ‘All of you. Because you are no better than a single celled organism. A virus. You have no control over what you do. You must be stopped.’

‘Perhaps,’ argued the Doctor. ‘But have you ever…’

He didn’t finish his sentence before the ax swept down. His head leaped from his shoulders, bounced off the wall and rolled across the room.

‘Enough philosophizing, you blood sucking leech,’ growled Emily.

She booted the head against the desk and left the room.

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CHAPTER 22

‘There’s no one here,’ said Tag. ‘Merlin gave us the fun-free zone to scout.’

‘You think fighting the *Nosferatu* is fun?’ asked Muller.

‘Sure,’ answered Tag. ‘Better than dealing drugs on the streets, and fighting idiots hyped up on PCP or whatever new drug is being pushed at the moment.’

‘I always forget your past,’ said Muller.

‘Yeah, whatever,’ mumbled Tag. ‘I’m doing good now.’

Muller grasped the big man by the shoulder and gave him a squeeze. ‘That’s what counts.’

They proceeded down the corridor, kicking open doors as they did.

‘What the hell are all these empty rooms for?’ asked Tag. ‘Must be thirty or more. What a waste of space.’

‘Maybe guest rooms back in the day. Store rooms? Who knows?’

Tag kicked down another door and then paused. ‘Hey, Muller. Check this out.’

He pointed at a flight of stairs that wended downwards. Sporadically placed wall sconces showed it continued down for at least two floors.

A stench of human waste and unwashed bodies wafted up, assailing their nostril with a fair bit of olfactory aggression.

‘Stinks,’ noted Muller.

‘Prisoners?’ ventured Tag. ‘Grinders?’

Muller shrugged. ‘Merlin told us to scout this floor and up. Not down.’

‘True,’ admitted the big man. ‘But here,’ he gestured around him. ‘No one to fight. Down there, maybe someone to fight.’

‘I think we should check upstairs first,’ said Muller.

‘What if they’re prisoners?’ asked Tag. ‘Sitting in the dark, terrified. Starving. Waiting to be eaten. Surely, we should strive to rescue them as soon as possible? It’s a moral imperative.’

‘A moral imperative?’

‘Yep. I think.’

Muller shook his head and smiled. ‘Okay, big man. Lead the way.’

The two hunters descended the steps. Muller had his shotgun in his hands, and Tag sported his twin Desert Eagles.

As they got closer to the bottom, they began to hear the sounds. A combination of wailing, insane gibbering and screeching.

‘Grinders,’ said Muller. ‘I hate Grinders.’

‘Sounds like there’s a lot of them,’ added Tag. ‘And I don’t have Missus Jones with me. She loves to dance with Grinders.’

‘They’ll be locked up,’ noted Muller. ‘We’ll take a look and see if we need to get the rest of the team to help.’

At the bottom of the stairway was a dark landing. One door leading off it. Thick, steel bound oak.

Tag turned the handle and, cautiously, pushed it open.

The smell hit them like a charging rhino. And now the door was open, the sound of the brain-fried vampire-spawn flooded the air.

Dim lights showed a row of steel barred cages. Each one held at least six Grinders.

There were ten cages in all.

‘I reckon we go back, get some help,’ suggested Muller.

‘No need,’ countered Tag. ‘Only six per cage. We open the cages one at a time, deal with them, then go on to the next cage. Simple.’

Muller thought for a few seconds, then he nodded. ‘Seems like a plan.’

Tag checked out the first cage. ‘How the hell do these doors open?’ he mused. ‘There’s no place for a key.’

‘Electronic,’ said Muller. ‘Over there. Those switches. Each one corresponds to a specific cell. You push it, door opens, Grinders run out. We dispatch them.’

‘Cool,’ said Tag as he walked up to the panel of switches. He stared at them, counting left to right, turning every now and then to verify his positioning with the actual cells. ‘Got it,’ he announced. ‘This is the button for cell number one.’

He pushed it.

There was a slight pause, and then, with a hum of electrical power, every cell door swung open.

Tag looked up.

‘Oh, crap.’

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CHAPTER 23

Merlin walked briskly through the central area of the house. The Prof trailed slightly behind, stopping every now and then to study a particular painting or wall hanging.

Unlike the rest if the team, Merlin didn't have to physically check room to room to ascertain whether they were occupied or not. He simply knew.

How?

Because.

'Keep up,' snapped the wizard.

'This Count fellow had a remarkable collection of art,' noted the Prof. 'I've seen two missing Degas, a Turner and a remarkably good counterfeit of one of Van Gogh's lesser-known Night Sky renditions.'

'Don't care,' said Merlin. 'There are a bunch of people in the room at the end of that corridor. Humans. Come on.'

Once again, Merlin took the lead and strode down the passage towards the room he had identified. Just before he got there, he casually mumbled a short incantation, gestured, and one of the doors leading off the passage exploded in a ball of flame. A brief scream was audible above the explosion for a fraction of a second before the flames caused it to cease.

'Bloody amateur,' sniffed Merlin. 'Trying to suppress his aura and ambush me.'

He reached out and tried the door handle. It was locked. But the barely perceptible murmur of conversation ceased the moment he jiggled the handle.

In deference to the people locked inside the room, Merlin refrained from simply blasting the door open. Instead, he wove a more subtle spell, placed his hand on the door and released it. The door vibrated slightly and emitted a high-pitched sound, like someone running their wet finger around the rim of a crystal goblet.

After a few seconds, the door slowly crumbled to dust.

It revealed a single room. Large. Triple bunk beds bolted to the stone floor. Along the far wall, a row of stainless-steel toilets. A couple of steel basins.

Two dim, naked light bulbs gave the room a graveyard glimmer. No windows. A single exhaust fan in the ceiling hummed and clattered as it made a feeble attempt to suck the dank, fetid air from the crowded room.

There were at least ten sets of triple bunks. Thirty beds. Almost every single one was full. There was nowhere else to sit. Hardly anywhere else to even move.

A prison room from hell.

The occupants, a mixture of men and women, stared hollow eyed at the two old men who had just entered. Their despair was a tangible thing. They knew where they were. They knew what they were there for.

And they waited patiently for death.

They had become the cattle the *Nosferatu* claimed them to be.

Merlin cast a light spell, throwing a floating orb of luminescence into the air.

At the same time, the Prof conjured up a gentle wind that swayed about the room, cleansing the atmosphere and bringing with it a smell of springtime and hope. It was a subtle magic available only to the highest of practitioners.

'Your ordeal is over,' stated Merlin. 'We are here to save you. To get you home.' His voice held the perfect blend of stern command and gentle kindness in equal measure. It was a voice that could command nations, lead armies and twist the very rules of nature itself,

It filled the prisoners with hope and courage.

The Prof's spell of cleansing, subtly healed minor wounds, slew the bulk of the filth from their hair and skin, and revitalized their flesh. It was nothing like a good meal and a safe night's sleep, but for now it would suffice. All he was trying to do was give them enough energy to leave the castle.

'People, follow me. Let us leave this foul place,' instructed Merlin. 'Professor, you take up the rear. Let's go.'

The former prisoners walked in single file behind the wizard, trusting in him implicitly.

And behind him came the Prof, spells prepped and ready to take on any comers that might threaten.

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CHAPTER 24

‘Umm, run?’ suggested Tag.

Muller transferred his shotgun to his left hand and filled his right with his sword. ‘Too late,’ he said. ‘Back away slowly. When we get to the stairs, they can only come at us two or three at a time. We can hold them there.’

The two hunters walked backwards, weapons pointing at the horde of twisted Grinders.

Tag pulled something from his trouser pocket.

‘What’s that?’ asked Muller.

‘Something the Prof gave me.’ The big man held up a small metal orb. Dull black. The size of a baseball.

‘A grenade?’

‘Sort of,’ acknowledged Tag. ‘It’s more like a smoke bomb. Except instead of smoke, it has a solution of silver nitrate. His theory is it’ll burn the vamp’s eyes and lungs.’

‘Well chuck it, quickly.’

Tag pulled the pin and lobbed the silver-bomb into the center of the horde. It exploded with an unsatisfactory plop. More party popper than hand grenade.

But the ensuing results were a sight to behold. Purple smoke billowed from the explosion, enveloping the Grinders completely as it filled the dungeon with a thick mist.

Immediately, they started screeching in agony. Tears of blood streamed from their eyes and they began hacking up blood and phlegm. Many of them fell to their knees, clawing at their own flesh in an unsuccessful attempt to stop the burning.

Seizing the opportunity, Muller took a flask of Holy Water from his pocket, opened it and started flicking it liberally over the screeching, wailing crowd of blood suckers.

‘The power of Christ compels me,’ he shouted.

The Holy Water sizzled and spat as it chewed through the Grinder’s flesh and bones. Stripping the meat from their skulls. Melting them with its power.

Then the booming of Tag’s pistols and Muller’s shotgun joined the cacophony.

At the same time, Tag started singing.

‘Purple haze, all in my brain,

‘Lately things, they don’t seem the same.’

Then he laughed out loud. ‘Man, I love Hendrix,’ he yelled.

Muller reloaded, fired and then dropped the shotgun. ‘I’m out,’ he said as he swung his sword, taking the closest Grinder in the throat.

The two hunters edged their way slowly up the steps, firing and cutting and punching and kicking as they did so.

Below them, piles of dead Grinders littered the stairs.

‘There’s still too many of them,’ shouted Muller. ‘We’ve got to shut them in as soon as we get to the top of the stairs. Can’t have thirty of them roaming the castle, or worse, escaping into the village.’

‘Bit of a problem with that plan,’ noted Tag.

‘What?’

‘I kicked the door down to get in, remember?’

‘I do now. Damn it. What we going to do?’

‘No idea,’ admitted Tag. ‘I’m the brawn. You’re the brains.’

‘Since when?’

‘Since now. I’m running low on ammo. Look, when we get to the top, I’ll try to prop the door in place and hold it there, you find help.’

‘You mean that door?’ responded Muller.

Tag glanced down at the splintered remains of what was once a door. When he had kicked it in, he had broken it into at least a dozen pieces. ‘We need a new plan,’ he yelled.

‘Just what the hell are you idiots doing?’

Tag glanced up to see Merlin standing at the top of the stairs, a thunderous expression on his face. ‘I thought I instructed you to scout upstairs. Why are you in a basement full of Grinders?’

‘Because Muller didn’t keep me on a tight enough rein,’ answered Tag. ‘So, it’s not actually my fault.’

Muller scowled. ‘Really?’

‘Sorry,’ apologized Tag. ‘Brawn, not brain.’

‘For heaven’s sake,’ said Merlin. ‘Both of you, get down.’

The two of them dropped to their knees, just as a massive fireball screamed over their heads and exploded amongst the oncoming Grinders. The heat was so intense it shriveled the hunter’s eyebrows and set their clothes to smoldering.

The effect on the packed Grinders was spectacular. The superheated plasma leaped from vampire to vampire, clinging to them like napalm as it burned through their flesh, eating away at them like some sort of ravening fire-monster.

‘Move it, you morons,’ snapped the wizard.

Tag and Muller rose and sprinted up the stairs before the intense heat roasted them alive.

As soon as they exited the stairway, Merlin unleashed another spell. This one buzzed and crackled with some sort of blue-white electrical power. A ball of lightning. He cocked his arm and chucked it down

the stairs.

The spell went off like a thunderstorm. Lighting arced across the room, shorting out on the steel bars, punching through the Grinder's flesh and turning the stone floor into bubbling lava.

When the spell finally sputtered to an end, there was not one Grinder left alive.

'Man,' said Tag. 'Why the hell do you even bother bringing us along? You don't need us. You're a one-wizard killing machine.'

'Because it's exhausting to do things magically,' snapped Merlin. 'Now come along, the rest of the team are waiting outside with the prisoners.'

The two hunters followed Merlin to the entrance, and outside.

'Where the hell have you guys been?' asked Troy. 'We heard shouting.'

'They've been playing silly buggers with the Grinders,' said Merlin. 'Decided to think for themselves instead of obeying a few simple instructions.'

'I pushed the wrong button,' explained Tag, in what was a perfect non-sequitur.

Merlin shook his head. 'Right. I've called on some help to move the prisoners. After they've been taken care of, the Prof and I are going to destroy this terrible place.'

'Do we have to?' asked the Prof. 'All of that magnificent art.'

'Yes,' insisted Merlin. 'All trace of the *Nosferatu* must be scoured from the earth. We cannot allow this to continue. It cannot live on in any way, shape or form. And that includes their ill begotten gains. It all goes.'

Four hours later, magical flames consumed the last of the *schloss*. Merlin conjured up a firestorm, and the Prof fed the flames with a vortex of wind.

Eventually, the heat rose to such a level it created its own weather pattern, pulling in more and more wind that fueled and refueled the roaring flames until they grew hot enough to melt stone.

By the end of the next day, there was nothing recognizable left.

Only molten slag and ashes.

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CHAPTER 25

A person's proficiency in chess is predicted by what is referred to as an Elo ranking. The lowest end of the scale is 100. The theoretical upper end is 3000.

There has been no human being with a rating higher than 2851. At this stage one is called a Super Grand Master. In the entire history of chess there have been less than thirty Super Grand Masters.

Ali Hadad had an Elo of 3000. There is no official ranking for someone that high on the scale.

Hadad had been playing chess for over a thousand years. He found it to be the ultimate representation of a true 'Game of Thrones'.

And, as such, he had picked up on Mikael Trotsky's naïve attempts to organize a coup against the Blood King and his entourage, almost the day he had started.

His blatant courting of the guards. His childlike efforts to bring other conspirators into his fold. And his ridiculous partnership with House Romanoff.

Hadad would have been amused, if he had not been so disgusted at the awful amateurishness of the whole affair. It offended his sense of professionalism. His love of competence.

And he was not the only one who viewed Trotsky's inefficient fumbling's with scorn. After a discreet enquiry from Hadad, Romanoff himself had turned on his potential fellow conspirator. Once he knew the game was up, he chose to tell all and remove himself as far as possible from Trotsky and his clumsy efforts to usurp the Blood King's power.

Hadad approached Jebe with all of the evidence then stood back and watched with amusement.

He was currently sitting alongside Jebe, in a concealed alcove off the Blood King's private chamber. They were waiting for Trotsky and his covey of subverted guards to make their move.

Tonight was the night. In fact, Hadad had worked out Trotsky's schedule before the traitor had done so himself. There were only a few times when the attempt could successfully be made. And they depended on the allocation of the guards, the times of day when the king was alone, and the whereabouts of the guards who were not in Trotsky's camp.

In fact, it had been so ludicrously easy to outplay the usurper that it held little entertainment for Hadad. But it was better than sitting

around waiting for news from Arend and his current progress regarding the search for the *Triginta*.

Stifling a yawn, Hadad heard someone fiddling with the outer door to the king's chamber. They were obviously picking the lock.

Moments later, his superlative hearing discerned eight distinctive sets of footsteps. The idiots weren't even capable of maintaining a decent level of stealth. He was sorely tempted to leap from his hiding place and yell, Boo! It would have been in keeping with the childlike level of subterfuge offered by these idiots.

But it wouldn't do to spoil the surprise.

The group snuck across the entrance area and headed towards the king's study. They knew the king was there alone, because Jebe had ensured the information was freely available.

Kicking open the door to the private study, Trotsky shouted.

'Prepare to meet the true death, tyrant.'

There was a pause. Then one of the guards yelled out. 'It's a familiar. In the chair. It's a familiar with a gag on, not the king.'

Jebe strode out of the concealed alcove, followed by Hadad.

They walked into the inner room.

'Ah, Trotsky,' said Jebe. 'As monumentally inefficient as usual.'

Trotsky turned to face Belikov's second. 'What? I…? How did…?'

'Idiot,' snapped Jebe. 'Your ham-fisted attempt to manage a coup was laughable. Pathetic.'

Trotsky's face reflected his utter astonishment. Then he noted that the only other vampires present, apart from his guards and himself, were Jebe and Hadad.

He smiled. 'You may consider me an idiot,' he said. 'But I am not so stupid as to confront an elder warrior and seven associates with only a scholar as backup.'

'He is not a scholar,' contradicted Jebe. 'He is a philosopher.'

Trotsky sneered. 'Well, forgive me. That will make a difference, I'm sure. Can you fight, philosopher?'

'I prefer not to,' admitted Hadad.

'What a pity,' scoffed Trotsky. 'Because, unfortunately your preferences hold little sway right now.' He turned to one of his guards. 'Kill the philosopher.'

The guard blurred into motion, crossing the interceding space in microseconds.

The clash lasted less than two seconds. Bones broke. Flesh tore. Blood sprayed across the room.

And the guard lay in pieces at Hadad's feet.

'I said, I prefer not to,' said Hadad. 'I did not say, I could not.'

'You unbelievable incompetent,' noted Jebe. 'If you had paid any sort of attention in the past few years, you would know, as does

everyone else in the palace, that Hadad used to be the chief enforcer for the Knights Templar. He was known throughout the entire medieval world as, *Murmur de mort*. The whispering death. As for me, I am merely here to observe. My friend,' Jebe gestured to Hadad. 'Do your duty.'

Trotsky died last.

Screaming for mercy.

It took a while.

And all the time, Hadad did not utter a sound.

Murmur de mort.

The whispering death.

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CHAPTER 26

Arend had sent the latest three pieces of the *Triginta* to the Blood King's palace using a team of trusted familiars.

Then a jeweler attached the three new coins onto the growing necklace that was to eventually become the complete *Triginta Argenteous*.

Now there were six out of the thirty.

The necklace literally hummed with power. An almost imperceptible sound that vibrated at a frequency so low, it affected all around it. As one approached, one could sense one's internal organs throbbing in time to the vibrations.

It was a distinctly unpleasant feeling.

That, plus the unavoidable problem that the *Triginta* was made up of silver coins, a metal that was an anathema to the *Nosferatu*, meant that simply being in its presence set Belikov's fangs on edge.

It felt like someone was filing away his canines with a sheet of rough sandpaper.

But the converse of this discomfort was the heady feeling of power the artifact bestowed upon the wearer.

When Belikov wore the necklace, albeit over a leather protective smock to prevent the silver actually burning him, he was almost impossible to resist.

Even Jebe, a vampire known for his mental strength and forthrightness, found that when his king was enhanced by the *Triginta*, any suggestion he made seemed to carry with it such power, such authority, perception and insight, that to deny his any wish was unthinkable.

If Belikov suggested the sky was dark green and the grass sky blue, the power gifted by the *Triginta* would make his statement seem fact. Regardless of what your eyes told you. His aura of absolute leadership would negate such trivial things such as reality.

And this not even a quarter of the artifact's full potential.

The only being not swayed by the power, was Hadad. He felt it. But he knew how to ignore it.

This was because, during his time spent with the Knights Templar, he had been exposed to many such artifacts.

A piece of the Cross.

The spear of Longinus.

Even the Arc of the Covenant.

He had never been high up enough to be shown the Grail.

The point being, over time, he and his fellow knights had been trained to ignore the powers of the Holy Relics.

But Hadad knew, judging from the power of the incomplete *Triginta*, even he would fall to its spell when it was the complete article.

And that scared him.

'You did well,' stated the Blood King. 'Not that Trotsky and his minions would have been able to harm me, even if you had not managed to unearth their pathetic rebellion.'

Jebe bowed. 'We live to serve, my king.'

'Yes,' agreed Belikov. 'You do. And now I shall give you the opportunity to serve me again. This coup attempt, foolish and pitiable as it may have been, still concerns me. I fear that some of the other houses may be seeing me as weak. And that will not do.'

'I am sure they don't, my king,' denied Jebe. 'It was but a single misguided instance.'

Belikov held up his hand to forestall any further disagreement to his theory. 'Regardless of what you think, it is my command that you put together a strategy to bring the rest of the Russian houses to heel. Bring me the leaders of all of the houses. I will address them. I will stamp out any misgivings they may have. I will instruct them, and they shall obey. It is time to crack the whip, dear Jebe.'

Jebe bowed. 'As you command, so shall it be.'

Belikov stared at Hadad. 'And you, Arab? I note you do not genuflect. Do you not agree with me?'

Hadad raised an eyebrow and then shrugged. 'What he says,' he answered, pointing at Belikov's number two.

Then, together with Jebe, he left the room.

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CHAPTER 27

The team were back in the folded space that held Merlin's mountain getaway.

'I still think we might have kept a couple of the paintings,' said the Prof.

Merlin didn't deign to answer. He had spoken, and his word was law.

'It sure made a nice fire,' noted Tag as he sat at the table, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together in an attempt to create flame.

'That's not how you do it,' snapped Merlin.

Tag looked up. 'Hey. Mister wizard,' he said, his voice calm yet questioning. 'Why you got such a bug up your ass lately? Wassuuup?'

Merlin stared at the big man for a few seconds, then he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. 'You're correct,' he admitted. 'I apologize.'

'So, what is the problem?' asked Emily as she walked over and put her hand on the ancient wizard's shoulder.

'It's those vampires,' interjected the Prof. 'Those ones you call the BUMF's. You know, the Big Ugly Man Feeders.'

'Big Ugly *Man Feeders*?' laughed Tag. 'Seriously?'

The Prof scowled. 'What?'

'Nothing,' said Emily. 'Carry on.'

'Thank you.' The Prof applied a flame to his pipe, puffed and continued. 'We have been doing a little research on them. And, quite frankly, what we discovered has us more than a trifle worried.'

'A lot worried,' grunted Merlin.

'Why?' asked Emily.

'They are members of House Belikov.'

Emily frowned. 'I don't know them.'

'Obviously,' said Merlin. 'How could you? Most of your knowledge comes from the internet, and vampires aren't much for social media.'

'I'm not sure if that was sarcasm, or just an old man being unreasonably snippy,' retaliated Emily. 'Whatever, it's basically true, so I forgive you.'

Merlin shook his head. 'I seem to be doing a lot of apologizing of late. Once again, sorry. Let me explain.'

'That would be nice,' said Emily.

Merlin explained the history of Belikov. The Blood King. And how his house was affected by the Chernobyl fallout, and his subsequent impact on the world of the *Nosferatu*.

‘However,’ he added. ‘It gets worse. The Prof and I are not yet sure, but it seems as if Belikov is making some sort of attempt to become the King of Kings amongst the *Nosferatu*. Not only of the Russian houses, but all of them. So far, we have found no evidence involving America, but Europe and Asia seem to be involved.’

‘I knew it,’ exclaimed Muller.

‘You did?’ asked the Prof. ‘Why didn’t you tell us?’

‘Well, I didn’t exactly know,’ admitted Muller. ‘But I suspected something was going on. Too many coincidences. Too much proof of different houses cooperating. And evidence of the Russians everywhere. In fact, the only place we haven’t come across any was at the Count’s castle.’

‘The Russian hatred for the German *Nosferatu* runs deep,’ said Merlin. ‘I doubt Belikov would deign to parley with the Germans. In fact, I suspect, once he has consolidated the Russian houses, he may very well declare war on the Germans.’

‘Good for us,’ said Troy. ‘We stand back, wait to see who wins and then take out the victors.’

‘You’ve come up against couple of the Chernobyl vampires,’ said Merlin.

‘Yes.’

‘And you still think that the German’s might be victorious?’

Troy didn’t answer.

‘I thought so,’ continued Merlin. ‘Imagine a hundred of those monstrous creatures, with Grinders, and well-armed and trained familiars. Most likely ex-Spetsnaz. Trust me, even you four couldn’t stand against them.’

‘We might if you stood with us,’ said Tag.

‘Even if Prof and I did, they would kill us all.’

‘He’s right,’ confirmed Emily. ‘It took everything I had to beat the last one.’

‘Me too,’ admitted Troy. ‘If I was facing two, I doubt I could have beaten both of them. Well, maybe, but not three.’

‘Three would be my limit,’ added Emily. ‘Or four. But the one I killed intimated he was far from one of the most powerful. So, I don’t know. It’s not good.’

‘Now add the rest of the Russian houses,’ said Merlin. ‘Another three, four, five hundred vamps. We are in big trouble. The only thing keeping me from having a full-blown meltdown, as it were, is the fact that vampires don’t play well together. Because if Belikov manages to form any sort of alliance, we are all finished.’

‘Well, that’s marginally depressing,’ said Emily. ‘What can we do about it?’

Merlin looked grim. ‘Hope,’ he said. ‘For some sort of miracle. Pray

to whatever gods you know that the Houses do not rally.'

'I have found the gods to oft be capricious and unreliable,' interjected the Prof. 'Perhaps some more practical advice would be welcomed.'

'We need to look for allies,' said Merlin. 'Both human and supernatural. If this is actually going down, basically, we need an army. And trying to convince an army of humans to fight irradiated vampires could prove, let's say, rather difficult.

'As for supernatural help, there are a few I might be able to call on, I shall put out some feelers, just in case.'

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CHAPTER 28

The land of the Fae is large. Perhaps twice the size of the Earth as we know it. Perhaps even more, for it is a difficult realm to measure in purely logical terms. Space folds back on itself, time runs differently and parallel universes coexist.

Where humanity has settled on three dimensions of space; length, width and depth, and one dimension of time, Fae scholars argue whether there are twenty, thirty or perhaps forty separate dimensions. Their arguments are to string theory as checkers is to chess.

At this moment, the Morrigan and her unintended new compatriot, Balor the Cyclops, were arguing. In all fairness, in the short time the two had teamed up, the Morrigan had come to realize that Balor's default setting was to disagree.

'I have my Fomorian warriors,' he grunted. 'A full dozen of them. I know Merlin is a challenging foe, but with your skills, my power and the combined weight of the Fomorians, we can beat him. Especially if we lay an ambush. Take him unawares.

'I see no reason we need to subjugate tribes of goblins and imps and force them to assist us. It is both unseemly and unnecessary.'

The Morrigan pursed her lips. 'We need warriors. Lots of warriors. And by Fae custom, if we defeat any of the Goblin tribes, they are ours to command. The right of conquest holds.'

Balor stared at the Morrigan for a full minute as he contemplated her words. 'Talk, warrior woman,' he snapped. 'What is it you are not telling me?'

'The wizard may have some allies,' she admitted.

'May?'

'He does.'

'Who?'

'A young girl.'

Balor laughed. 'So?'

'Well, she might be … the Daywalker.'

'What?'

'And there's a werewolf.'

The giant cyclops scoffed. 'I eat werewolves for brunch.'

'Yes,' agreed the Morrigan. 'Except this one might be the Omega.'

'Holy cra…'

'And they have teamed up with a Knight of the Holy See, Muller. And some idiot called Tag.'

‘Muller the Pious?’ asked Balor.

‘Maybe.’

‘And Tag the immortal?’

‘Is that what they call him now?’

‘Yes, that *is* what they call him now,’ answered Balor facetiously. ‘On account of the fact you cannot kill him.’

‘Everything that bleeds can die,’ snapped the Morrigan. ‘Oh yes, and that awful Professor is with him.’

Balor paled visibly. ‘Morrigan,’ he said in a low voice. ‘We need to talk.’

‘There is nothing to talk about. We need cannon fodder. And a few hundred Goblins should suffice.’

Balor shook his head. ‘Maybe. But Goblins will be as chaff before the wind. With opposition like you have mentioned, we need a class of warrior far stronger. A few hundred Goblins will be as naught before the Daywalker and her compatriots.’

‘What do you suggest?’

‘Orcs.’

The Morrigan laughed. ‘Orcs? Don’t be ridiculous, Balor. No one can control them. As dumb as pigs and as trustworthy as a rattlesnake.’

‘Their custom also adheres to the right of conquest,’ replied Balor. ‘If one of us challenges one of their chiefs to a battle and wins, that tribe must obey us for the passing of twelve moons.’

‘And you could defeat their chief?’ asked the Morrigan.

‘Undoubtably,’ answered Balor. ‘However, as we are the challengers, they get the right to choose whom they fight. I have little doubt the chief will choose to face you in mortal combat, as opposed to me.’

‘Why?’

‘What can I say, Orcs are incredibly misogynistic. Why fight a male when you can fight one of the weaker sexes?’

‘I am the goddess of war,’ stated the Morrigan. ‘Do you honestly think the Orc chief would be that stupid?’

Balor grinned. ‘I can almost guarantee it. And once you have defeated him, each defeated tribe will give us access to a hundred plus eight foot tall, five-hundred-pound warriors with attitude.’

The Morrigan nodded. ‘True, but do not forget, they are as dumb as a box of hammers.’

Balor shrugged. ‘So? As you already said, we need cannon fodder, not military geniuses. We could overwhelm Merlin and his cohorts with simple numbers. As you know, in battle, quantity has a quality all of its own.’

‘True. Do you know where to find the chief?’

Balor smiled again. ‘I do.’

‘Then lead on.’

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CHAPTER 29

‘What is a Sotheby?’ asked Mist.

‘It’s an auction house,’ answered Arend. ‘Are you familiar with auctions?’

‘I am not grotesquely stupid,’ snapped Mist. ‘I was simply unaware of the Sotheby.’

‘Sotheby’s actually, the “S” is important. Whatever, it’s in London, England. We need to go there.’

‘And the twins are convinced that another part of the *Triginta* will be on the block?’ asked Remer.

‘Nothing is carved in stone,’ answered Arend. ‘But their information points that way. They think it is part of a large collection. Said collection contains a few Roman Denarii, one which might be what they are looking for. The seller has no idea. You see, many scholars believe that Judas was paid with Shekels of Tyre. A common misconception, as those were the only coins accepted by the Jerusalem Temple at the time. However, most trade was conducted using Roman coin, thus, the Denarii. And if the twins are convinced, that is enough for me. After all, they are very thorough.’

‘Where is this London,’ enquired Remer. ‘And will we have to go in an iron flying box again?’

‘Nerd alert,’ shouted Arend. ‘What have I told you?’

‘No noob sentences. Don’t sound like a dork,’ parroted both of the Fae.

‘And what is the iron flying box called?’

‘An airplane,’ said Mist.

‘Correct. So, what’s with this flying box crap?’

Both of them shrugged.

‘The next time either of you use noob nerd language again,’ continued Arend. ‘I am going to remove the first section of the little finger on your left hand.’

‘Harsh,’ mumbled Remer.

‘But fair,’ snapped Arend.

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The trio of *Hulder* exited the private jet and took a cab to the Dorchester Hotel in London. The Sotheby’s auction was scheduled for the next day and Arend decided to get to the city with plenty of time

to spare.

Plus, he liked London. English pubs, fish and chips, Carnaby street and good cider.

He also loved the fact that the British police didn't carry firearms. Much easier to fight someone who brought a truncheon to a firefight.

That evening the three of them ate at the hotel, then Arend took the noobs to a pub in the East End. To call it a dive would have been kind. But that's how the *Hulder* boss liked his drinking establishments. Down, rough and dirty.

Arend ordered a round of Scrumpy Jack, a coarse apple cider with a kick like a cantankerous mule. To ensure they all got the full effect of the alcohol, he chased the rough drink with vodka.

'Listen up,' he said to the noobs. 'I'm going to order a few more of these, then I'm going to pick on a group of the meanest looking patrons here and insult them.'

'Why?' asked Mist.

'Because Londoner's do not take insults lying down. So, they will call me out and, most likely attack me.'

'Ooh, a fight,' interjected Remer. 'Can we kill them? Burn them? Explode their heads?'

'No,' answered Arend emphatically. 'However, we will fight them. But without magic. And I'm serious about that, you use magic, it's chopping off finger time.'

'Why?' asked Remer. 'I don't get it. What does it matter if we kill them with magic, or our bare hands?'

Arend giggled. 'No killing,' he said. 'That's the point. It's fun. We are going to fight, using fists and feet, and no killing.'

Both of the noobs stared blankly at him.

Arend shook his head. 'Trust me. I insult, they react. We all fight. But no killing. Actually, make sure you don't use any of your more esoteric martial skills. Fight as a *Hulder* child would. Be as ineffectual as possible, but still win.'

Their leader's instructions were so obscure they left no real room for questioning. It was simply a case of, listen and do as told.

They both nodded.

'Great,' responded Arend as he walked over to the bar to get another round.

Half an hour later the three *Hulder* and five stout Londoners were having at it. Punches flew, people were thrown across the room and a small amount of blood decorated the furniture.

Another hour on, and the *Hulder* and Londoners were drinking together, toasting the Queen, singing drinking songs and slapping each other on the back.

During a pause in the loud revelry, Mist stood up and started to

sing. It was a traditional *Hulder* funeral song. All about a man who died, never having plucked up the courage to tell a girl he loved her. A song about loss, desire, opportunities missed and heartfelt angst.

Her voice throbbed with passion as she sang. A lilting, almost Celtic cadence with a low husky delivery.

When she finished, there was nary a dry eye in the room.

One of the Londoners started to clap. Then they all joined in.

An old man approached her and bowed slightly. ‘You have the gift, lass,’ he stated, in a broad Irish accent. ‘And my heart sees now what my eyes could not. You are one of the old-folk, are you not?’

Mist smiled, but did not answer.

The old Irishman nodded, took her hand and kissed the back. ‘Thank you,’ he said. And then he left, his face a picture of wonder and gratification.

Arend smiled benignly at all and ordered another round of drinks for everyone present.

Ye gods, he loved this city.

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CHAPTER 30

Even the most exclusive auctions at Sotheby's are open to the public, and there is no obligation to bid.

However, some patrons are treated with more deference than others. One such was Lord Rupert Poncenby-Smythe, the oldest son of the recently deceased Lord Phineas Poncenby-Smythe, founder of the Poncenby-Smythe range of incontinence pants (by Royal appointment).

Phineas had started with a vast family fortune and turned it into an obscene mountain of wealth. And on his death, the title and the entire estate was left to the ministrations of his son, Rupert.

Unfortunately, Rupert was not a chip off the old block. In actual fact, Rupert was little more than a staggeringly stupid, pathetically weak, lazy wastrel. And in the past few months since his father's death, he had done his very best to squander the family fortune. As with everything else, he was unsuccessful. The staggering affluence defeated his rather pathetic attempts to spend it.

Of late, however, Rupert had managed to up his game. This was mostly due to his new girlfriend. A Russian model of such staggering beauty that it was immediately apparent to all that the only reason she was swimming in the same pool as the aging, chinless, large eared, stick insect that was Lord Poncenby-Smythe, was his money.

And Katerina Karkoff was doing her very best to separate him from as much of it as possible in as brief a time span as she could.

In short, she was having a blast. And the few minutes a week of sweaty congress she had to endure, was a small price to pay for such largess.

Now they were at Sotheby's. They had come to buy stuff. Just general stuff. Anything she felt like. Rupert was showing off in the only way he knew how.

Conspicuous consumption.

He might have a tiny … umm … whatever, but he had a huge wallet. And woe betide anyone who tried to bid against him. He would show them, the world, and the delightful miss Karkoff, who was the king of all pins.

***

Arend had come along with enough cash to ensure he would be able

to bid successfully on the lot he wanted. He could have simply taken it, but after careful contemplation he decided it was far simpler to throw money at the problem until it went away.

He took a seat near the front of the room. Mist and Remer sat each side of him. Their collective good looks attracted more than a little attention. Arend ignored it. Both Mist and Remer preened like show birds, flirting outrageously with all comers.

Arend was about to tell them off for attracting unnecessary attention, but then he decided to let them have their fun. After all, it was doing no harm.

He did notice a tall, dark haired beauty with full lips and cut-glass cheekbones looking at Mist like she was some sort of enemy. Arend hoped Mist didn't take offence, or the tall brunette might just end up being a lot less alive than she would have anticipated when she got out of bed that morning. She was sitting next to man who seemed to be made up of spare parts tied together with string. Tall, lanky, disjointed, chinless, and a laugh that made a donkey's bray seem like a mother's lullaby.

The first few lots came and went without much excitement. The chinless wonder bid for anything shiny. Gems, jewels, ornate snuff boxes. If it twinkled, the brunette would nudge him and he would stick his bidders paddle up until he won the item. Then she would simper, and he would expose his misshapen yellow teeth in what he must have considered to be a winning smile.

Finally, lot twenty-seven. A collection of rare coins circa AD 27 to 36.

Arend put his paddle up.

The brunette nudged mister chinless.

And the fun and games started in earnest.

The bids rose quickly through the low five figure range and into the six. At One million four hundred and seventy thousand Pounds Sterling, approximately two million dollars, Arend reached his limit. He had not expected to pay more than a million. At most.

The gavel came down, chinless gave another of his rubble-toothed smirks and the brunette giggled shrilly.

Arend was pissed. How dare they. Bloody … he tried to think of a suitable insult … humans.

He turned to Remer. 'I want those coins. We could wait and get them after the auction, but who knows where they may end up. So, I think we should take them now.'

Remer grinned. 'Rules of engagement?'

'What the hell,' answered Arend. 'Go bonkers. Whatever you and Mist want. Have fun, just make sure you don't damage the coins.'

Mist stood up and called out to the brunette. 'Hey, tall, dark and

gormless. I saw you looking at me.'

Karkoff turned to face the *Hulder*, an expression of contempt on her face. Everything about her said, look at me, I am the wealthiest. My boyfriend has more money than you.

Then her head exploded.

After that, the world went mad.

Collateral damage was the watchword of the day as fireballs, lightning strikes and ice shards destroyed the room and everything in it.

Arend cast a shield around the box of coins in order to protect them, then he strolled through the mayhem and picked it up.

The auctioneer made a weak attempt to wrest the chest back, so Arend used a blade of ice to remove both his arms. And that stopped any further resistance. At least from him.

Sounds of police sirens pierced through the screams and wails of the wounded and the dying, so Arend figured it was time to go.

He knew he could just as easily have taken the coin chest without so much wanton violence, but he was irritated and, truth be told, had a slight hangover from the night before. Consequently, he decided to take it out on the local population. After all, they were only humans.

A group of policemen rushed into the auction room and Arend knocked them down with an exploding ball of plasma, setting their clothes on fire and searing their exposed skin.

Then he called to his two compatriots, conjured up a portal, and the three of them stepped through to appear back at his French residence.

The portal closed behind them, cutting off the sounds of violence and mayhem.

Arend opened the coin chest. It was full of graded coins, each one in its own plastic container. He stared throwing them out, briefly inspecting them as he did.

Halfway through, he stopped, dropping the box and keeping hold of the single coin they had been looking for.

It vibrated sightly with an obvious otherworldly power.

'Yes,' he said triumphantly.

'Boss,' ventured Remer. 'Can I ask a question?'

'Go ahead.'

'If you can just teleport us from place to place, why did we have to take the big iron flying box?'

Arend stared at the Fae assistant. Then he conjured up an ice blade. 'Hand,' he commanded. 'Stick your finger out.'

'Oh no, please, boss. Sorry.'

'Too late. Don't say I didn't warn you.'

The blade flashed.

The finger fell.

Remer scowled. ‘Ouch.’
Shut up,’ snapped Arend. ‘Noob idiot. Anyway, it’ll grown back.’
‘I know. But it still hurts.’
‘Whatever. Let’s get this coin to Hadad.’

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CHAPTER 31

‘Take a look at this,’ said the Prof as he placed his laptop on the kitchen table.

‘What,’ asked Tag. ‘You found some videos about cats on You Tube?’

The Prof stared at the big man for a few seconds. ‘Cats?’

‘Yeah. Cat videos are funny. And cute.’

The Prof shook his head. ‘No, not cats. This is currently on all of the major news channels. Look, everyone.’

They gathered around the computer and the Prof hit play.

It was a shaky amateur video taken by someone’s cell phone. The picture swayed from side to side and jumped frequently as the camera person ducked and dived while still attempting to get footage of the ensuing mayhem happening around them.

In the background, fireballs careened across the room. Wind vortices ground their way through the chairs, throwing them aside and smashing the resulting wreckage into people. Hundreds of razor-sharp shards of ice ripped and tore through human flesh.

The cacophony of explosions was almost loud enough to drown out the screams and wails of the wounded and the dying.

‘*Hulder* battle magic,’ said Merlin.

‘Yes,’ agreed the Prof as he slowed the video down. ‘Look, here, here and here. There are three of them. These two are doing the real damage. This one seems to merely be watching.’

‘What’s he doing now?’ asked Emily.

They all watched as Arend strolled over to the auctioneer, cut his arms off and took a small chest from him.

‘Man,’ said Troy. ‘These psychos are hard core.’

‘Yes,’ said Merlin. ‘The *Hulder* are known for their cruelty. They find violence amusing. Death and torture are a hobby to them. They revel in destruction.’

The sound of approaching police sirens intruded.

‘Here come the coppers,’ noted Tag.

A thin strip of light appeared in the video. Then it expanded into a doorway and the three *Hulder* jumped through. As soon as they did so, it disappeared.

‘Teleportation,’ said Merlin. ‘Damn. There are very few mages powerful enough to do that.’

‘You can,’ observed Muller.

‘Yes, I am one of the very few,’ answered Merlin.

‘I think it is Arend,’ offered the Prof. ‘The image is of atrocious quality, but I recognize his tells. The way he conjures. I’m pretty sure it’s him. The other two, no idea. Just your run of the mill *Hulder* warrior-mages.’

‘Arend,’ mused Merlin. ‘What would bring that nightmare out into the open. For the last hundred years or so, he’s been concentrating primarily on scholarly pursuits. We need to find out what was in the chest he took. That should give us a hint.’

‘Already done that,’ said the Prof. ‘It’s a collection of rare coins circa AD 27 to 36. Here,’ he flicked to another tab on his laptop. ‘This is a list of them.’

Merlin scanned the list. ‘Nothing out of the ordinary here,’ he concluded. ‘Do you have any theories?’ he asked the Prof.

The Prof frowned. Then he took out his pipe and proceeded to carefully pack it.

All knew this was a habit of his when he was preparing his thoughts. A physical manifestation of the anxiety he was feeling.

Finally, pipe set to his satisfaction, he lit it with a gesture and puffed it to life.

‘I do have a theory,’ he said. ‘And I hope to all of the gods it is felonious.’

‘Well, shoot then,’ urged Merlin.

‘Amongst the coins in the chest, one was a Roman Denarii. A silver one. Now, this may seem like a bit of a flyer, but bear with me. You see, after some sifting through various sources on the internet, I discovered that this is not the first robbery that may have involved magic. Particularly *Hulder* battle magic. There have been various reports of some serious atrocities. Mass murder and proof of fire, wind and ice being used on the victims. In Germany and on some isolated island cult dwelling.

‘Strangely, there have also been reports of a bizarre incident at a place known as The Farm. A French Foreign Legion training facility. Not entirely sure what that was all about, but it may be linked.

‘Whatever, that’s not important, what is important is that this theft is part of an ongoing trend.

‘Have any of you heard of the *Triginta Argenteous*?’

‘Yes,’ confirmed Merlin, at the same time the rest of the team offered their denials.

‘For those of you ignorant to the facts, I will summarize. You all know the story of Judas, the disciple who sold out Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.’

There was a general mutter of assent.

‘Good, the *Triginta Argenteous* is the name given to those pieces of silver. Thirty Roman Denarii. It is said that an artifact was created

from the coins and that artifact gives the owner immense powers.

'From what I know, and I have studied this in some depth over the last few centuries, there is no such artifact. One may have existed at some stage, but fairly soon after Judas's death, the coins were split up. I won't go into the details, suffice to say. They do exist and even singularly, they are capable of extending great powers to their owner. As a full set, their power will be off the charts.

'There are many different theories as to what those powers might be, but the general consensus is the *Triginta* imparts powers of leadership. I am talking serious leadership capabilities. The one who wields the *Triginta* will evoke worship, love, reverence and devotion from whomever they choose as their followers. They will be impossible to resist.

'However, it also comes with a curse. In that the user will die an early death. It basically drains it's owner of their life force.'

'Well, surely that's a good thing?' offered Emily. 'So, any evil person who uses it is going to die. Problem solved.'

The Prof nodded. 'True. But what if the owner was already dead?'

'Then that won't be a problem,' said Tag. 'On account of them being not alive… oh, crap.'

'You see what I'm saying?' asked the Prof.

'Yes,' said Tag. 'What if the owner is a vamp? Then there is no life force to drain. You would have an eternal, really bad, blood sucking king of the world.'

'The Russians,' snapped Muller. 'Does this have any link to the Blood King and his attempt to expand his empire?'

'I think so, yes,' answered the Prof. 'I suspect that Belikov is collecting the coins that make up the *Triginta Argenteous*. And if he does, he will be unstoppable. Millions upon millions will die, and the rest of humanity will be enslaved. They will become little more than cattle for the *Nosferatu*.'

'We have to stop him,' said Emily.

'So, no pressure then,' quipped Troy.

'How about I make us all a nice cup of tea,' said Tag. 'I'm sure things will all seem a lot better after.'

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CHAPTER 32

‘You mentioned The Farm,’ said Muller.

‘Yes,’ affirmed the Prof. ‘I heard there was an incident involving what could only be described as monsters. They took out a score of Legionnaires. Eventually one of the Commandant’s exterminated them.’

‘Did you get a name, by any chance?’

‘I believe it was, Swanepoel. No first name.’

Muller grinned. ‘That would be Commandant Quinton Swanepoel. Recipient of the Military Medal, Cross for Military Valor, and the *Legion d’honneur*.’

‘So, you know him?’

‘We have fought alongside one another a few times,’ confirmed Muller. ‘Before I got involved with the church. I would like to speak to him, hear exactly what happened.’

‘I have had dealings with the Legion in the past,’ interjected Merlin. ‘I know Brigadier General Jean Lardet. Well, I am more a family friend than a personal friend of the General. I will accompany you.’

‘We’ll all come along,’ said Emily.

Merlin shook his head. ‘No. I will be teleporting the two of us. Over that distance, it would be impossible to take anyone else. Even with just the pair of us I will be pushing the limits.’

‘Fair enough,’ conceded Emily. ‘When are you going?’

Merlin glanced at Muller.

‘I’m ready to go at any time,’ said the Knight.

‘Soon,’ replied Merlin. ‘I have something I’d like to discuss with the Prof and then we’ll be off.’

‘What do you need?’ asked the Prof.

‘Latobias,’ answered Merlin.

‘The Celtic god of wind,’ said the Prof. ‘What about him?’

‘Can you contact him? Ask if he can help us?’

The Prof frowned. ‘He is easy to contact. After all, the wind is everywhere. But I’m not sure if he will answer. You know how flighty he can be.’

‘He has helped us before,’ noted Emily.

‘So? That means nothing,’ said the Prof. ‘As I have oft said, the gods are capricious. They make decisions using information we are not privy to. And their thinking defies all human logic. It happens when you think in millennia, not years or lifetimes.’

‘You and Merlin are old,’ pointed out Tag.

‘Yes,’ agreed the Prof. ‘And do we think like you do?’

‘Point taken,’ admitted the big man.

‘Anyway, in answer to your request,’ the Prof said to Merlin. ‘I shall do my best.’

‘That is all I can ask. Now, Muller, stand next to me. Oh, and this is a long jump, so, you may feel a little ill. Try not to throw up on me when we land.’

‘As if,’ mumbled Muller as he stood next to the wizard. The air shimmered and bolts of electricity crackled about the room.

Then they were gone.

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CHAPTER 33

The wizard and the Knight shimmered into existence directly outside the main gate to The Farm.

'Well, that wasn't so bad,' said Merlin.

Muller swayed slightly, placed his hands on his knees – and threw up everything he had ever eaten. Ever.

Merlin waited patiently for the Knight to finish, and then he patted him on the back. 'Better out than in, I always say.'

At that moment, two armed sentries rushed up, brandishing their rifles.

'*Arrêt*,' shouted the one. '*Ne bouge pas*.'

'Evening, fellows,' said Merlin by way of greeting. 'We're here to see Brigadier General Jean Lardet.'

'Where did you come from?' asked the sentry as he scanned the area, picking up not sign of transport, nor any fresh tracks leading to the gate.

Merlin wiggled his fingers.

'Don't,' urged Muller. 'These Legionnaires are notoriously lacking in humor. 'He turned to the sentry. '*Pardon, monsieur, veuillez appeler le général ou le Commandant. Dites-leur que* Muller*, le Chevalier du Saint-Siège est ici.*'

The sentry's look of concern immediately changed to one of awe. 'Muller the Pious?' he asked.

Muller scowled. 'Yes. The selfsame one. Now run along, we have little time.'

The sentry threw up a smart salute, turned on his heel and ran.

The second sentry stood to attention. 'If you and the old man could wait here,' he asked respectfully. 'I am sure the General will be along shortly.'

'Old man?'

Muller chuckled. 'Well, you are a million years old.'

'Not true, I'm only been around for a couple of millennia. Old man? Bah! I should turn him into a frog for that.'

'Can you? I mean, are you able to, that wasn't a request.'

'Of course. You want to see?'

Fortunately for the sentry, Merlin's demonstration was cut short by the arrival of the first sentry and another man.

'Muller, you SOB,' the newcomer shouted.

'Quinton, you useless peon,' replied the Knight.

The two men hugged, laughing loudly as they did.

'And who might this be?' asked Quinton.

'This is my good friend, Merlin.'

Quinton shook the wizard's hand. Then his expression changed from joy to apprehension as he took in Merlin's appearance, his silver hair, his violet eyes and his obvious aura of great power.

Before he could speak, Muller nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'That Merlin.'

'*Merde*,' cussed the Legionnaire. 'Are you still caught up in that otherworldly, saving us all from the apocalypse, religious crap?'

Muller nodded. 'That's why we're here. Heard that some of that crap went down right here on The Farm.'

Quinton nodded. 'Something definitely did. Come with me, you will need to speak to the General.'

They followed the Commandant through the gates and into the camp.

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'Those monsters that killed my men were vampires, you say?' mused the General. 'What were they doing here?'

Merlin shrugged. 'No idea. Jean. We know they are searching for a certain artifact. But I don't think that was tied up with their visit. It may simply be they were lost. Or working on false information.'

'And you are sure that these vampires are looking at world domination?' continued the General.

Merlin nodded. 'I know it sounds the height of some insane conspiracy theory, but it is what it is. I personally have been fighting the *Nosferatu* for many centuries. It is a war that never ends. Your father knew all about it, I am surprised he didn't tell you.'

'He hinted,' replied the General. 'To be honest, we weren't close.' He leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers. 'Commandant,' he continued.

'Sir,' answered Quinton.

'Put together a team of ten men. The very best. It looks like the Legion is about to go into the vampire killing business.' He looked at Merlin. 'I assume you were going to ask for our help?'

Merlin smiled. 'Actually, yes, I was. Thank you.'

'Our family is still indebted to you,' answered the general. 'And as the leader of the Legion, this is also now my family. So, it is the least I can do. Also, it is the job of the Legion to combat evil, whatever form it may take. We will need a day; give me an address, and I will send the men to join you as soon as we are ready.'

Both Merlin and Muller stood up. The four shook hands and Quintin showed them to the door.

'Is there anything else?' he asked.

Muller shook his head. ‘No, thank you. I’ll see you when I see you.’
‘Not if I see you first, laughed Quinton.
‘Peasant.’
‘Reprobate.’
The air shimmered, lighting crackled.
The wizard and the Knight disappeared.
Quinton shook his head. ‘Weird.’

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CHAPTER 33

Muller threw up again.

Then the two men walked to the front door of Merlin's hideaway and let themselves in.

As always, they went straight to the kitchen that was the hub of the home. The rest of the team were seated around the kitchen table, drinking from steaming mugs of tea. With them was someone Muller had worked with before.

The newcomer stood up and bowed slightly. 'Merlinus Ambrosias Myrddin Wyllt, I greet thee.'

Merlin bowed low, a much deeper genuflection than that paid to him. 'Latobias Noricum, patron of sky, mountain and wind, I greet thee.'

Then the two stepped forward and hugged each other, both with broad grins on their faces.

'I thought you may not come,' said Merlin.

Latobias shrugged. 'The Professor called, and I was but ten minutes away, so I came. The team have explained what is happening. The situation seems dire.'

'Very much so,' confirmed Merlin. 'We have just been visiting the French Foreign Legion, they have tasked a team to help us.'

'That is welcomed news,' said Latobias. 'I too can think of a few who may be of help.'

'Gods?' asked Emily.

Latobias nodded. 'Yes, but the deities I am thinking of have fallen out of favor of late. I think this situation may be just the sort of thing to help them get back into the game.' Turning to the Prof, the god continued. 'Can you organize me some transport. If I am to help, I will need some sort of aerial conveyance, for while I can travel anywhere, the rest of you shall need a physical means to do so.'

'Of course,' replied the Prof. 'Any specific requests?'

'I like helicopters. See if you can fetch me an Airbus H175 Supermedium, or a Bell 525 Relentless. Either will do nicely.'

'I'm on it,' confirmed the Prof.

'Do you need my bank details?' asked Emily.

The Prof shook his head. 'No need. Merlin has more money than most countries. He won't even notice the cost.'

'Man, must be nice to be rich,' said Tag.

The Prof turned to the big man. 'Do you want some money? Give

me your account numbers and I'll throw a couple of million in if you like.'

Tag grinned, then shook his head. 'Nah, I don't even have a bank account. And anyway, what would I do with all that money? As long as you guys keep me in shirts and suits, and provide unlimited ammo for missus Jones, I'm good. But thanks for the thought, Prof. Seriously, that was a real nice offer.'

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The Airbus was delivered to a nearby address the next day. Which just goes to show how massive amounts of cash can make anything possible, even rush orders on state-of-the-art helicopters.

Latobias transported himself to the helicopter and then flew it back, guiding it into the area of folded space that contained Merlin's hideaway with ease. One of the obvious benefits of being a deity.

'Can you pick up some people for me?' Merlin asked him as soon as he touched down.

'Sure.'

'The contingent of Legionnaires. Do you need coordinates?'

'No,' replied the god.

'How long…wait, sorry, I know. Ten minutes each way.'

Latobias chuckled. 'Ten minutes. As always. I'll get going now. Will they be ready?'

'I'll make sure they are.'

'So, we getting ourselves a private army?' asked Tag.

'Pretty much,' replied Merlin.

They went inside to get something to eat. Just over forty minutes later, the sound of the helicopter landing rent the still mountain air.

The team went outside to greet the new arrivals.

Quinton deplaned first, followed closely by nine more Legionnaires, all heavily armed and fully kitted out.

'I thought you said we were getting an army,' said Tag, disappointedly. 'There's only ten of them.'

Quinton heard the big man and grinned. 'Ten Legionnaires is an army, my friend.'

'He speaks the truth,' said Muller. 'Trust me.'

Tag raised a skeptical eyebrow. 'We'll see.'

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CHAPTER 34

Master Ben Chu leaned on his oaken staff and studied the ten Legionnaires, his expression blank. Unreadable.

The soldiers stood at rigid attention, staring straight ahead.

Finally, the Master turned to Merlin. ‘Yes, I will train these men,’ he said.

Commandant Quinton Swanepoel frowned. ‘Permission to speak?’

Ben nodded.

‘We are the French Foreign Legion, sir,’ said Quinton. ‘We go through one of the most rigorous training regimes in the world. And this team of men are the very best of the best. With all due respect, sir, I doubt there is much you can teach us when it comes to combat.’

‘I see,’ returned Ben, his voice soft. Almost regretful. ‘Well then, French Foreign Legionnaires, prepare yourselves for battle.’

None of them moved.

‘You heard me,’ snapped the Master.

‘Do it,’ yelled Quinton.

The legionnaires moved from attention into different stances of preparedness, fists ready, well balanced, prepared for combat.

There was a flurry of snow, like a miniature whirlwind, accompanied by the solid sound of oak striking bone and flesh.

Less than three seconds later, every Legionnaire, including Quinton, was lying in the snow, clutching various parts of their body’s.

‘Training starts tomorrow morning at sunrise,’ said Ben. ‘You will report dressed in trousers only. No shirts, no shoes.’

Then he disappeared.

Quinton struggled to his feet and stood, swaying slightly as a trickle of blood ran down his face. ‘That,’ he said weakly. ‘Is one mean old leopard-man.’

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‘We need to go to Pareen,’ said Latobias, referring to the magical Fae town that existed under the city of Paris. ‘I think we can safely leave the Legionnaires here, under the less than gentle auspices of Master Chu and the Commandant.’

‘Any reason?’ asked the Prof.

‘One of the gods I mentioned is there. She will need a bit of convincing, and for that, one needs a personal touch. I think the

whole team should accompany me.'

'Slight problem there,' interjected Emily. 'They don't allow werewolves or vampires in. Troy is a werewolf and, technically, I'm both. The cats will sense us and go mental.'

Emily was talking about the thousands of felines that lived in the Fae cities. They were encouraged to stay there, as they were the perfect sentries and alarm systems for any werewolf or vampire intrusion. Both supernatural classes had long been banned from the Fae cities, since their constant warring spilled over and started resulting in collateral damage.

'Yet you have both been there before,' stated Latobias.

'Yes,' admitted Emily. 'Sylvian taught me a way of covering my aura and extending that cover to those around me. But I have grown in presence since then. My aura is much harder to conceal. As is Troy's. He was a simple pack member when we last went. Now he is the Omega. I doubt I could shield the both of us.'

'Probably not,' confirmed Latobias. 'However, I can.'

'Are you sure?' asked Emily.

The Celtic god stared at her and, just for a split second, unshielded a mere trace of his power.

Emily looked away. 'Sorry,' she apologized. 'Of course you can.'

'Get ready everyone,' said Merlin as he turned to face Tag. 'And before you ask, no. Missus Jones is not invited.'

Tag pouted. 'Not fair,' he mumbled. 'We's like Billy Shakespeare's, Romeo and Judy, ours is a forbidden love.'

'Juliet,' corrected Troy.

'Whatever.'

The big man stomped off to collect his gear.

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CHAPTER 35

As always, when flying with Latobias it took them ten minutes to reach a private airfield just outside of Paris. From there they used a chauffeur service to take them to the Pantheon Monument in the Sorbonne area of the city.

They debussed and followed Latobias to the rear of the monument. There was a single door, slightly recessed into the stone wall. No visible sign of lock or handle, and the door itself was fitted so tightly one would be unable to slip even a hair around it.

The Celtic god placed his palm against it and with a sigh of escaping air it swung inwards. Walking inside he beckoned them to follow him.

'Not looking forward to this,' said Tag.

'Why?' asked Latobias.

'The forty gazillion steps,' answered the big man. 'Both boring and tiring. Not to mention, dark.'

Without replying, Latobias led them to another door. He opened this one in the same way. But instead of revealing another corridor, this one gave access to an ancient, steampunk looking elevator.

There were no buttons donating the floors. Instead, a series of polished brass levers, wheels and valves took their place.

'Is this safe?' asked Tag.

Latobias didn't answer. He waited for all to enter, then he proceeded to spin wheels, pull levers and open various valves. Steam billowed out, and a low whistle issued from the valves. Then, with a violent lurch, followed by a series of squeaking shudders, the brass and steel cage plummeted downwards at such a pace that everyone became momentarily weightless.

Seconds later, the cage slowed down so quickly, they had to flex their knees to absorb the deceleration.

'No stairs,' said Latobias in a deadpan voice.

The door rattled open and they were greeted by the spectacular vista that was Pareen.

It was even more beautiful than Emily remembered it to be. Most likely because this time she wasn't under threat, running from vampires and fighting for her life.

The thousands of crystal stalactites reflected the innumerable balls of magical lights that floated across the cavern. Shades of warm white, light blue and even the odd yellows and reds, all refracted by the crystal into dazzling rainbows. The fragrance of heather and roses and

fresh cut grass filled the air, even though Emily could see no sign of any of the aforementioned.

As before, the general hubbub of the city, shouting vendors, street musicians and arguing business people, was all underpinned by a low throbbing hum. It took a while to realize that the droning swell and fall of noise was in fact the sound of the thousands of cats. Sitting in groups on street corners, running across roofs, climbing pillars, winding around people's legs as they walked. Tabbies, gingers, grays. Persians, short hairs, rag dolls and pavement specials, all purring constantly.

The city's living alarm system.

'Fear not,' said Latobias. 'None shall detect your aura. Nor that of the Omega.'

They followed the god down a long flight of stairs and through the central market. Many of the Fae greeted him, most bowing as they did so, paying him obvious respect. Surprisingly, just as many did the same to both Merlin and the Prof.

'We're in exalted company,' said Muller.

'Yeah, well, we pretty high and mighty too,' returned Tag. 'The Pious, the Immortal, the Daywalker and the Omega.'

'Try not to announce who you are to the entire population, my boy,' advised Merlin. 'After all, that would destroy the hard work Latobias has undertaken to conceal your identities.'

'Oops, sorry,' apologized the big man. 'Just tourists,' he continued loudly. 'Nothing to see here. Normal folk going about their daily business. Except for the god, and the two really old guys.'

'Tag,' snapped Merlin.

'Boss?'

'Shut up.'

'Yes. Sorry again, boss. Just trying to allay any suspicions.'

Merlin looked away, trying his best not to chuckle.

They continued to follow Latobias through the sprawling underground city. Slowly, the areas they walked through became noticeably less salubrious until after thirty minutes or so they were in a part of town that could only be described as low-budget.

There were less magical lights. More shadows, and more things lurking in the said shadows. Buildings were more ragged looking, unkempt and unwashed.

Loud music blared out of some of the establishments, and small fires burned on street corners.

'Who would have thought areas like this existed in a magical underground city,' noted Emily.

'Areas like this exist through necessity,' said the Prof. 'In all cities throughout the world, no matter how far back in time you go, there is

always a cesspit. An area where the detritus sinks to the bottom to collect. You cannot get rid of them, as they provide a necessary outlet.

'Granted, they also provide a Petri dish to culture violence, theft and various nefarious doings, but they will always be there.'

'Where are we heading, and when are you going to tell us who we are meeting?' asked Merlin.

Latobias pointed ahead. Open double doors. Two tall humanoid doormen, both clad in full armor, massive broadswords slung across their backs.

'Rough looking place,' commented Troy.

'We're going to meet, Sirona,' added Latobias.

'Really?' questioned Merlin. 'That skanky old witch? What for? Her powers of late have dwindled to a level that is less than impressive.'

'She is not a witch,' answered Latobias.

Emily noticed Latobias didn't deny Merlin's, *skanky* comment. 'What, or who exactly is Sirona?' she asked.

'Goddess of thermal springs,' answered the Prof. 'Fallen out of favor lately, given that not many people worship thermal springs anymore.'

'Did they ever?' asked Troy.

'Oh yes,' confirmed the Prof. 'The Romans considered her a healing divinity. She was always big in the Nordic countries. Any place with geysers or hot springs. Even the Victorians gave her a nod. Nowadays, it's only the lunatic fringe. And gods tend to reflect their worship. So, yes, Sirona has tended towards the flakey of late.'

'What powers does she have?' asked Emily.

Merlin sniffed. 'Water based powers. Not that she has much left. Can shoot jets of water. Heat it up, good for making a cup of tea, I suppose.'

'She can also increase the mineral content of water,' added the Prof. 'Tends to make the water smell of rotten eggs.'

'Okay,' said Emily. 'So, not much then.'

'Also mixes a mean cocktail,' said Latobias. 'But judge her not on what she has become, judge her on what she once was, and what she may be again.'

He led them past the doormen and into the bar.

It was a single, large room. Dim balls of light floated above the various groups of tables. A goblin was playing a lute and singing. Well, Emily assumed it was singing, although it sounded more like a man quietly wailing in either agony, or terminal remorse.

A long bar ran down the one end.

And serving behind it was a woman. Maybe six foot three tall. Thin and willowy with eyes so pale blue it was disconcerting. Almost transparent so the orbs looked white with a black dot in the center where her pupil was. She had applied her makeup with a heavy hand,

dark kohl around her eyes, savage slashes of shiny, bright scarlet lipstick, matted layers of mascara and stripes of rouge on her cheeks.

But even with all that, the most noticeable thing about her was her hair. Long and black as coal, it swirled about her with a life of its own. Rising, falling, billowing from side to side, exactly like seaweed being buffeted about by the sea.

The entire ensemble made her, not beautiful, but mesmeric.

The team followed Latobias up to the bar. There was a selection of other customers, some at the bar, some sitting in the chairs, being served by waitrons.

Even the smallish show of patrons contained more species than Emily had come across before.

The Prof, sensing her curiosity, leaned forwards and spoke under his breath. 'Far table, that's a mountain troll,' he informed. 'Huge, cantankerous. Seldom seen in Pareen, must be here for a specific reason. That table over there, *Hulder*, you might call them elves. Whimsical creatures, vain and unpredictable.

'Humans over there, strange that, seeing so many together. Oh, look there, a Hobgoblin, the fellow with the sparkly blue skin, sitting with those other normal goblins. Very rare. Basically, goblin royalty. Hence the larger size, finer features. Very touchy, don't stare at him, they tend to go off at any perceived insult. And they literally perceive anything as an insult.'

'Hey, sparkly skin guy. Is that natural or do you put, like, glitter on or something?'

Emily and the Prof turned to stare at Tag, who was busy looking at the Hobgoblin, an expression of genuine interest on his face.

The Prof rolled his eyes.

Emily shook her head. 'Sometimes it's like being in charge of a six-year-old.'

'What are you doing?' snapped Merlin.

Tag frowned. 'Nothing, just asking shiny-man if his sparkle is natural.'

'You have insulted me, human,' roared the Hobgoblin, as he stood up, wielding a short, wide-bladed spear.

Tag looked honestly baffled. 'Why? How?'

'Your mere presence offends me. And even though I was munificent enough to ignore your fetid existence, you decided to hurl insults at me and question my heritage.'

'Not true, blue-guy,' argued Tag. 'I don't give a crap about your heritage; I was simply asking about your twinkly-ness.'

The Hobgoblin stepped around the table and approached the big man. Pound for pound, the Hobgoblin was actually larger than Tag. Taller, broader and more muscular.

He flourished his spear. ‘I demand satisfaction.’

‘Whatever,’ responded Tag. ‘I demand loads of crap. The company of missus Jones for one, but you think anyone gives a damn? No. Not fair, is it?’

The Hobgoblin stopped dead, baffled by Tag’s apparent non sequiturs.

‘Who the hell is missus Jones?’ he asked, drawn into the conversation despite himself.

‘Exactly,’ answered Tag. ‘It’s like she doesn’t exist to them. Makes me so mad sometimes. And I don’t care that she’s so heavy, and needs two car batteries to work. Or even that her ammunition is so expensive. We got a good thing going, missus Jones and me.’

The Hobgoblin started to talk, then stopped, then started again as his brain caught up with the conversation, and then simply decided to ignore it.

‘I demand satisfaction,’ he repeated.

‘Tag,’ said Merlin. ‘Try to handle this without making too much of a scene. And by that, I mean killing him would be creating a scene.’

Tag nodded. ‘Okay, mister-sparkles,’ he said as he took off his jacket and then unbuttoned his shirt to expose his chest. ‘There you go, you can stab me with your little spear. That make you feel better? Then me and my pals can carry on.’ The big man turned to Merlin. ‘And you will owe me another shirt.’

‘Fair enough,’ agreed the wizard.

The Hobgoblin stared at Tag for a few seconds, then with a howl of anger he lunged forward and stabbed the big man in the center of his chest. Twisting the blade viciously, he withdrew it and stood back.

Tag dropped to one knee with a grunt of pain, stayed still for a moment and then stood up, the wound already closed. ‘Hey, check that out,’ he said proudly. ‘I managed to keep all the blood off my clothes. Shows some skills that.’

The Hobgoblin gawked at Tag, then he looked closely at his spear, checking the blood coating it, then back at Tag. Finally, he reverted to type. ‘I demand satisfaction,’ he yelled again.

‘Oh, sod off,’ said Tag as he stepped forward and swung a mighty right hook. His fist connected with the side of the Hobgoblin’s head with a sound like a melon dropping on concrete. The blue skinned entity flew across the bar, smacked loudly into the far wall and slumped unconscious to the floor.

There was a collective impressed sigh from everyone watching, as the big man’s obvious superhuman speed and strength became apparent.

The rest of the goblins, who looked as if they were about to provide back up to their leader, decided that discretion was the better part of

valor, and instead they picked blue-boy up and exited without a sound or backward glance.

'What a strange dude,' said Tag as he buttoned back up. 'Nice sparkles though.'

'Hey, Latobias, is that you?' yelled the barmaid.

'Yes, Sirona, as you well know,' answered the god.

'You are not welcome here. And neither are your friends.'

'Just a few minutes of your time, Sirona,' answered Latobias. 'Please hear me out and then we'll go.'

'Fine, but there's a two-drink minimum.'

'Since when?'

'Since now. And I get to decide who drinks what.'

'Okay,' agreed Latobias as they all bellied up to the bar.

Sirona cast her eyes over the team. 'Myrddin Wyllt,' she greeted Merlin. 'Professor.' Then she looked the rest up and down. Finally, she smiled. Or more accurately, leered at them. 'My, what a sexy bunch of almost humans,' she commented. 'If my powers serve me correctly, it's the Immortal, the Pious, the Omega and the Daywalker.'

'That's what I said,' blurted Tag. 'But then Merlin told me to shut up.'

'He would,' replied Sirona. 'He's such a prig. Never mind, would you like me to kiss you better?' she licked her lips lasciviously.

Tag looked down and shuffled his feet, pushing a few cats out of the way as he did..

'Oh, how sweet,' chuckled. 'I've embarrassed you.'

'Enough, Sirona,' said Latobias. 'Serve us our required drinks so that we can talk.'

Sirona pushed a couple of cats off the counter, placed a row of shot glasses down and then, with a mere gesture, she floated two bottles of clear liquid over to her. The tops unscrewed themselves and a mixture of the two liquors gushed into the glasses.

'Impressive,' mumbled Muller.

'If you think that's impressive,' she said. 'You should see how bendy I am. I can scratch my nose with the back of my knees. Now drink up, have your say and then please leave.'

The team tossed back the two shots each.

Sirona made a moue of disappointment when none of them flinched or showed any discomfort at the industrial strength alcohol.

'What did you expect?' asked Latobias. 'This is not a normal collection of beings. Did you honestly think a bit of liquor could cause any discomfort?'

Sirona shrugged. 'Can't blame a girl for trying. Darn, even trolls choke when they down a shot of that stuff. Anyway, pay up and talk. Quickly, time is money.'

Latobias slid a small gold coin across the bar. ‘We go to war,’ said the god of wind without preamble. ‘The *Nosferatu* are allying under the auspices of the Blood King and they seek the destruction of the human race.’

‘And?’ asked Sirona.

‘That isn’t enough to pique your interest?’

‘The humans stopped being my concern many centuries ago.’

‘It won’t stop there,’ interjected the Prof. ‘You know the *Nosferatu* have long held a hatred for the hidden cities and their occupants. If they subjugate humanity, where do you think they will strike next?’

‘If that comes to pass, then I shall fight them.’

‘We’re wasting our time here,’ snapped Merlin. ‘And at any rate, what earthly need would we have for a goddess who is fit only for pouring drinks, heating water for tea and making springs smell bad? Come on, let’s go.’ Merlin made as if to leave.

‘You insufferable SOB,’ yelled Sirona. ‘You know nothing. You have always been obsessed with this war against the vampires. Ever since I can remember it’s been the amazing Merlin against evil. Well let me tell you, wizard, you are no great shakes yourself. You have lost almost as many battles as you have won. Begone, petty magician, you disgust me.’

‘Hey, water woman,’ said Emily.

‘Sirona turned to face her.

And Emily delivered a cracking slap across her face.

The entire room went silent.

‘You dare to strike a god?’ whispered Sirona.

‘No, I dare to strike a petty, vindictive has-been who is too cowardly to join the battle because she has lost her way. A timorous ex-someone who is more interested in wallowing in self-pity than actually getting her head out of her ass and doing something.’

Sirona visibly flinched at Emily’s tirade. ‘You know nothing, child,’ she hissed. ‘I was once revered. Worshipped by millions. The entire Roman Empire left me offerings and sacrifices. And now? The fickleness of humanity repulses me. Where are my worshipers now? Where is the love? The adulation?’

‘Lady, you got some serious issues,’ interjected Tag. ‘People’s worship don’t matter. Who cares who prays to who, or what they sacrifice? Evil is evil, and those who stand for good don’t need a reason to fight it, they do it because it’s the right thing to do.

‘This whole team here, they fight the good fight and no one cheers them on. No one even knows that we do it. When we die, there won’t be no state funerals or lines of mourners. Hell, the fights we get into, most likely there won’t even be a grave.

‘But we don’t care. We do it because we can. And if you are the only

one capable of doing a job, then you gotta be some serious lame brain to walk away from it.

'And another thing, I make the best cup of tea in the world, and I would be honored if you were there to help me.'

Sirona stared at the big man for a while.

No one spoke.

Then she said. 'I can do more than make tea, Immortal. For I am Sirona, beloved of Apollo, Guardian to the waters of the Danube, sister of the Roman Empire, Great goddess of the Celts, healer of the sick and mother of plenty.

'Thank you for opening my eyes.' She bowed to Tag. 'I too will be honored to brew tea with you.'

She turned to face Latobias. 'So, windy,' she said with a slight smile. 'Looks like we're putting the band back together.'

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CHAPTER 36

‘I can’t believe it took us ten minutes to fly to Arizona,’ said Emily. ‘That’s five thousand three hundred and ninety-three miles. It’s impossible.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Merlin. ‘It is. More so when you consider we didn’t need to fill up with avgas either.’

The helicopter’s rotors wound slowly down, and the churned up desert dust sank back to earth. About a hundred yards from their landing spot stood a small, ramshackle cabin. The windows were unglazed and the door hung open on broken hinges. Outside, a windmill creaked sullenly in the meager wind, drawing water from a deep well.

There was no sign of life.

The eight hunters, including Sirona, deplaned and wandered towards the cabin. As they approached, a thunderous roar echoed across the surrounding monolithic red rocks that reared up from the valley floor.

‘Get off my land, you fudging, pieces of sugar.’

A humanoid figure appeared from behind one of the rocks. He was around six feet tall, but the large antlers growing out of his head stretched his height to almost eight feet. He carried a massive sledgehammer in his right hand and he swung it as he walked, treating the fifty-pound piece of metal as if it were a light cane.

‘Belenas?’ asked Merlin, turning to Latobias. ‘Seriously? I thought we were scraping the bottom of the barrel before,’ he continued. ‘No offence meant,’ he said to Sirona.

‘Offense taken, you vainglorious piece of crud,’ quipped Sirona as she rolled her eyes.

‘Who the hell is, Belenas?’ asked Emily.

‘God of laughter,’ answered the Prof. ‘Used to be huge. Now, comedians, movies, drugs, they’ve all stolen his power. Dissipated it.’

‘How? I would have thought the more laughter the better for him,’ said Emily.

‘You’d think,’ admitted the Prof. ‘But they no longer worship *him*. Instead, the people worship the actual performers. The comedians themselves. The movie stars. The tweeters and instagramers. Back in the day, no one worshiped the common bard or the court fool. They laughed at them, but the reverence and devotion was reserved for Belenas. Now, not so much.’

The god strode up to them and stopped, jaw jutting out in a pugnacious fashion, arms akimbo, eyes squinted in anger. 'What the gosh darn are you people doing here?'

'Hi, Belenas,' greeted Latobias. 'How goes it with you?'

'Pee off, wind-boy,' snapped the god of laughter. 'You're not welcomed here. And you know darned well how I'm golly fudging feeling. I'm depressed. Have been for over a century now. Oh, hello, Sirona.'

'Greetings, Belenas.'

'He's got horns,' blurted Tag. 'Even if he comes with us, he can't exactly hang around, everyone will notice his horns.'

'They are not narfing horns, you son of a bucket,' snapped the god of laughter. 'They are antlers. And anyway, people can't see them. Not human people at any rate.' He turned to Latobias. 'Seriously, what are you doing here? And especially with these two shuzzbutting troublemakers,' he gestured at Merlin and the Prof.

'We have come to rescue you from your life of quiet desperation,' interjected Sirona. 'But before we tell all, how about you offer us a seat and something to drink, or has your lack of humor affected your good manners?'

'Galloping gremlins, Sirona. Don't be such a nasty hobknocker, you know I hate company.'

'Well?'

'Okay. You thirsty? Follow me, I got beer.'

A few minutes later they were all sitting around a table drinking flagons of surprisingly good, chilled lager, while Latobias laid out the current events for Belenas.

The rest of the team, besides the gods, Merlin and the Prof, couldn't exactly concentrate, on account of the fact that the inside of the ramshackle, falling down log cabin was vast compared to the outside. It was also incredibly luxurious and featured running streams of water, verdant foliage in a variety of pots, carpets, chandeliers and works of art on the pristine white walls.

And a very well stocked wet bar.

As Latobias talked, Belenas gestured casually and a bowl of peanuts appeared on the table. The team helped themselves to them, passing them around.

Emily noticed that however many they took from the bowl, it remained full.

At the end of Latobias's explanation as to why the hunters were there, Belenas shrugged. 'This has little to do with me,' he said. 'I live alone. The fate of the world does not affect me. Even if the *Nosferatu* take over, I will still be alone. No more followers. And depressed.'

'This may be a stupid question,' said Troy. 'But, do you have to be

the god of laughter? It's just that it seems a pretty general theme. You know, like the god of talking, or breathing. Can't you, sorta, I don't know. Specialize?'

'I'm a god,' replied Belenas. 'I can do whatever I want. But I have always been the god of laughter. That is what I am, have been and will be.'

'Yes,' insisted Troy. 'But, why?'

'Because.'

'Because why? Seriously, I'm not trying to be obtuse. Why? I mean, for example, you carry that huge hammer, why can't you be the god of hammers?'

Belenas looked shocked. 'That's Thor's job. And let me tell you something, young dillweed, you don't mess with Thor. Okay, granted, he's sort of in semi-retirement at the moment, but no.'

'Hold on,' interjected the Prof. 'The boy might be onto something here. Brigid was the goddess of healing, later she changed and became the goddess of metalworking. It can be done.'

'She was the Dagda's daughter,' said Belenas. 'When the head of the pantheon is your father, all things are possible.'

'If you is always sad, why don't you become the god of depression?' asked Tag.

Belenas shook his head. 'No, that would be …'

Everyone thought for a while.

Finally, Sirona said. 'There is no god of depression.'

'I'd have no followers,' said Belenas.

'So?' argued Tag, in support of the Omega's idea. 'You got none now, and you is miserable anyways. I tell you, being depressed is big nowadays. Everyone is always complaining about how bad they got things. It's like, trending, you know.

'Plus, you would get the chance to hit some vampires inna face with your big hammer,' concluded the big man.

Belenas didn't smile. But his face took on an expression that was a little less destitute than it had been before. He nodded. 'Duck water and fudge berries,' he said. 'I'm going to do it. Let me get some gear and I shall meet you at Latobias's flying chariot.'

The newly minted god of depression left the room, and the team of hunters went outside.

As they walked back to the copter, Emily spoke. 'I have to ask,' she said to Merlin. 'What's with all the fudge and sugar and stuff?'

Merlin chuckled. 'Belenas abhors cuss words. He finds them uncouth and not befitting a god of laughter. So, he substitutes.'

'Yeah, but all the time. He can't finish a sentence without fake-cussing. And mostly we know what he's actually saying. I mean, fudge, sugar.'

‘Sure,’ interjected Tag. ‘We know when he says fudge he actually means, fu…’

The copter started up, its massive engines drowning out the rest of the big man’s statement.

Belenas exited his huge but small cabin, ran over and climbed in.

‘Let’s go,’ he boomed. ‘Feels good to be doing something again,’ he admitted as he patted Tag on the back. ‘Cheese wizz, it’s great to be depressed. Thank you, young man.’

‘You’re welcome,’ answered Tag. ‘It’s always a pleasure to help someone feel … worse. Better? Whatever.’

The helicopter thundered skywards, ten minutes away from its next destination.

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CHAPTER 37

‘Can’t we just fly there?’ asked Emily.

Merlin shook his head. ‘No. Nor can we take any of our modern weapons. You must understand, we are entering a different realm. A separate universe that runs on different rules. Magic is all encompassing. Technology is almost non-existent.’

‘And, when we enter the land of the Fae,’ added the Prof. ‘There are certain rules you must all obey. Never accept a favor from anyone. Never give them your full name. Do not have sexual congress with anyone. And, finally, realize that life and death is viewed differently to the Fae. Duels to the death are a frequent occurrence, umbrage can be taken for the most obscure reasons and one must make every attempt to be courteous and soft spoken. There is much power lurking there, and you do not want to be on the receiving end of it.’

‘Look, it’s simple,’ interjected Merlin. ‘Tag, don’t be an idiot. Now, are you ready?’

‘Why me?’ asked Tag. ‘I always try my best to be polite. It’s practically my middle name. Well, actually, my middle name is Cuthbert, but if anyone calls me that, I’ll smack them inna face.’

Emily patted the big man on the arm. ‘He just means, think carefully before you speak, that’s all,’ she said. ‘You know, we all need to follow Merlin’s lead, keep quiet and try not to attract attention. That’s all.’

‘Okay, fine,’ said Tag. Slightly mollified by Emily’s explanation. He adjusted the large battle axe strapped to his back and nodded. ‘I’m ready.’

‘Latobias,’ said Merlin. ‘If you could.’

The god of wind nodded and, with a complicated gesture, opened a rift between the here and the now. A portal to another dimension.

The land of the Fae.

Latobias had chosen a fairly remote spot for them to enter. On the edge of a forest, close to a range of snow-capped mountains.

Judging by the level of the rising sun, it was early morning, even though they had left home in the midafternoon.

‘As you know,’ the god of wind said. ‘We are here to make contact with, Grannus. He is the god of shiny things.

Emily snorted. ‘Well, I can see why he fell from grace. Who the hell worships shiny things?’

‘You would be surprised,’ answered Latobias. ‘Long, long ago,

people oft put a shiny rock in their cave and treated it with reverence. Later, you must have heard the expression, diamonds are a girl's best friend. Lots of people worshipped shiny things.'

'True,' admitted Emily. 'But not so much anymore, I reckon. Now they worship the money or the fame that led to getting the shiny stuff. Weird.'

'Come on,' said Latobias. 'There is a fair bit of walking to do. I know Grannus's vague whereabouts, but we shall need to ask around to pin him down.'

The team followed Latobias as he walked along a barely discernable track.

'Where we going?' asked Tag.

Latobias pointed ahead, towards the foot of the mountain range.

No one else spoke for the next hour as they simply trudged forward. After breasting a small hill, a village came into view, some two miles away. Latobias adjusted their track, veering towards it.

The village was typical, right out of every fantasy book Emily had ever read. A ten-foot-tall wooden palisade wall surrounded it. Four guard towers, one on each corner.

Sturdy wooden gates, manned by a pair of sentries kitted out with leather armor, small shields and spears.

'The village of Undervale,' said Latobias as they approached. 'Large enough to carry a couple of good inns, a market and a small detachment of guards controlled by a local sheriff. Oh, and by the way, they think I am a traveling bard. Same name, so don't gainsay them.'

Everyone mumbled agreement.

'Tag,' stressed Latobias.

'Hey, I'm subtle,' bemoaned the big man.

'Yeah, as a lightning strike,' joshed Troy.

The two guards threw a lazy salute at Latobias when he walked up.

'Bard,' greeted the one. 'Welcome back. Got any new material?'

Latobias laughed. 'Why, you tired of the old stuff? It's classic, the new stuff is all crap.'

Both of the guards laughed along with him. 'True, tell them what they know,' agreed the guard. 'Keep the punters happy. Who are your companions?'

'Just a group of traveling mercenaries,' answered Latobias. 'Thought I would hang out with them while crossing the mountains, what with all of the bandits about.'

'Makes sense. The entrance tax had gone up,' continued the guard doing all of the talking. 'Three coppers per person now. Bloody queen, more greed than sense.'

'Jacoby,' gasped the second guard. 'Talk like that will have you

swinging from a gibbet.'

'Nah,' denied Jacoby. 'Latobias is good.'

Latobias pulled out a leather pouch and handed over two silver coins. 'Keep the change, friends.'

This time the guards gave him a proper salute.

Again, Latobias took the lead, wending his way through various cobbled streets, past Tudor-style timber framed houses, taverns and shops.

'The guards looked human,' noted Emily.

The Prof nodded. 'They do, but they are most definitely not. The guards were both lower cast Fae. You can tell the difference between the casts with ease. The higher casts are taller, finer features, willowy figures.

'The lower casts are incapable of wielding magic. Well, not strictly true, they can, but only small amounts. And even that is frowned upon. Not illegal, per se, but not encouraged.'

'I don't get it,' interjected Muller. 'I thought the Fae were elves.'

Merlin chuckled. 'Don't say that word in this realm. What you are referring to are the *Hulder*. Humans make that mistake often. They think of the Fae as *Hulder*. And while this is partly true, all of the residents do refer to themselves as the Fae. But the actual Fae are a specific race. They are split into two realms, the Winter Fae and the Summer Fae. The realm is also physically divided as such.

'Then each faction is further split into two separate casts, lower and upper. You stay in the cast you were born into. It's pretty restrictive, but that's the way it is.'

'What part of the realm are we in now?' asked Troy.

'Summer,' replied Merlin. 'The Winter kingdom begins at the ridge of that mountain range. The range, called the Dragon's Spine, runs the breadth of the land, dividing the two kingdoms.'

'Here,' said Latobias. 'This is the inn we shall be staying in.'

Emily looked up at the sign. "Hogshead Tavern and Inn".

They followed the god of wind through the open front door, straight into the tavern.

Once again, Emily felt like she was taking part in some serious cosplay. Rushes and fragrant herbs covered the flagstone floor. Roughhewn tables and chairs, a solid wooden topped bar against the far wall, and a selection of patrons ranging from obvious laborers to silk clad merchants.

She also noticed, judging from Merlin's descriptions, none of them appeared to be higher cast.

When she mentioned that to the wizard he nodded. 'True. The higher casts would never be seen in an establishment such as this. Fae who put in an honest day's work make them uncomfortable. However,

you will see the odd *Hulder*, on the whole they are a touch reclusive, but they do mix with all.'

'What about goblins, trolls, all those other species?' asked Emily.

'The same tend to hang with the same, and the different with the different,' quipped Merlin. 'Trolls, goblins, Orcs, mostly found around the more mountainous parts of the realm. Strictly speaking, they control their own kingdoms, but practically, they fall under the auspices of the Fae royals.

'The *Hulder* however, definitely rule themselves, and no Fae royal would dare gainsay that fact.'

Belenas elbowed them aside as he bellied up to the bar. 'Ale,' he bellowed, slamming his meaty hand down on the wooden top. 'Large flagons of it. Lots.'

'Do you have any wine?' asked Sirona.

'Poo on a stick, woman,' yelled the god of being depressed. 'Troll bogeys to wine, it sours the stomach and leaves one with a foul disposition. Ale, barkeep. And a round for everyone in the house, on me.'

'Thank you, sir,' responded the barman. 'Most generous.'

'That's me,' agreed Belenas. 'Generous to a mothersmoking fault. Latobias, pay the man, I find myself temporarily financially embarrassed.'

The wind god shook his head and paid up. As he was doing so, he discussed hiring rooms for all for the night, again paying from his seemingly endless purse.

The team picked up their ales and found a large enough table to sit at.

They had only just sat down when a waitress walked over. She was holding a lute.

'Latobias,' she said. 'Potchermen was hoping you would play for us.'

'Potchermen?' asked Troy.

'The landlord,' answered Latobias. He stood up and took the proffered instrument. 'Sure,' he said. 'But only one song.'

The waitress squeaked in excitement as the god walked to a small raised dais in the corner of the room.

A hush descended on the crowd as they all turned in their seats to look at Latobias, and a general whisper of anticipation swept the room.

Then Latobias began to sing.

It was more than simple lyrics and music.

It was the score to every listeners life.

It was the beginning, and the end, and all in between.

It was life, and it was death.

It was laughter, and it was weeping.

It was the joy of victory, and the harsh pain of defeat.

It was the gentle caress of a summers breeze.

It was the destructive force of a winter storm.

It was the voice of a god, and all who listened heard it with their very soul.

Emily found, to her astonishment, that she was weeping openly. And when she looked about her, there was not a dry eye in the room.

Slowly, one by one, people stood and started to applaud. Until the entire room was on their feet, stamping and clapping and shouting.

One of the gods had sung.

And it was good.

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CHAPTER 38

The next morning the team gathered in the common room to break their fast.

Both Troy and Tag were eating massive steaks with a side order of fried eggs. Everyone else settled for bread and honey. Except Belenas who had ordered mead and was dipping his bread into it.

Emily shook her head. ‘Really?’ she asked. ‘Mead for breakfast?’

‘It’s made from honey, so there’s no fiddle sticking difference between what I’m having or what you are,’ argued the god of depression.

‘I spoke to the landlord last night,’ said Latobias. ‘He thinks Grannus is living in, or near, a village up in the mountains.’

‘No worries then,’ said Troy. ‘After brekky we’ll take a hike and go find him.’

‘The village is called, Grzwaklsnok,’ added Latobias.

‘That’s a bit of a mouthful,’ said Emily.

‘Not if you’re a troll,’ returned Latobias.

‘Oh, snot on an acorn,’ grumped Belenas. ‘A frigging troll village? I hate trolls.’

‘Why?’ asked Muller.

‘Everyone hates trolls,’ interjected Sirona. ‘On account of they are foul-smelling, vile, aggressive and almost terminally stupid.’

‘And they tend to eat humans,’ added Belenas.

‘Hopefully, Grannus is living near the village, not in it,’ said Latobias. ‘Then we can bypass the trolls completely. We shall set off directly after all have broken their fast.’

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It took almost two hours of fast walking to reach the general area of the village of Grzwaklsnok. Latobias halted the group far enough away from the settlement to observe whilst remaining under cover.

They were high enough up the Dragon’s Spine mountain range to be in the area of permasnow, but after the training that Master Chu had imposed upon the team, the cold no longer bothered them.

Obviously, the gods, Merlin, and the Prof were also impervious to mere changes in temperature.

‘He’s there,’ said Latobias.

‘Where?’ asked Merlin.

‘That cage, in the square. Look closely. Looks like a pile of unwashed clothing in the corner. That’s Grannus. The trolls are keeping him locked up.’

‘How?’ asked Emily. ‘I thought he was a god.’

Latobias shrugged. ‘Who knows? Grannus is a strange character. The best way to find out is go and ask.’

‘There will be a fight,’ stated the Prof. ‘It’s inevitable.’

‘I was hoping to avoid that,’ admitted Latobias. ‘But if it comes to that, I’m sure we won’t have a problem besting them. If they follow tradition, they will issue a challenge to one of us. They fight, we win, and that’s that. Still a little puzzled as to why Grannus is allowing them to keep him in an exposed cage like some sort of animal.’

‘It’s because Grannus is like some sort of animal,’ offered Sirona. ‘Let’s be honest, he’s awful.’

‘Oh, well, let’s go,’ said Latobias.

The hunters stood up and made their way towards the trollish village.

As they approached, a crowd of twenty heavily armed trolls rushed out to meet them.

‘Man, these buggers are almost as ugly as the BUMF’s,’ noted Tag.

‘BUMF’s?’ questioned Sirona.

‘Yeah, Big Ugly Moth…’

‘Weapons out,’ commanded Merlin. ‘Look as intimidating as possible. Troll’s respect physical force, nothing else. Tag, take the lead, I think dealing with these things may fall into your particular area of expertise.’

The big man drew his massive battle ax and stepped forward. ‘Tag got this,’ he said as stood firm, feet astride, jaw set pugnaciously, a slight smile on his face. ‘That’s why they call me, mister diplomacy.’

The trolls halted in front of him, the rear ones bumping into the one’s in front, many of them falling over each other. An avalanche of flesh, armor, massive wooden clubs, and stupidity slowly rumbling to a halt.

Up close, the trolls were even more massive than they seemed at a distance. The shortest was seven feet tall and as wide as a wagon. The biggest, over eight feet. They all wore mismatched steel and leather armor and carried humungous wooden clubs fashioned from tree trunks. Some had steel spikes imbedded in them, others were adorned with simple iron studs.

None carried a shield.

Shields were for wimps.

‘What you do on our land?’ asked the largest troll. ‘We no invite you.’

‘We invited ourselves,’ answered Tag.

The troll spokesman frowned. ‘How can invite yourself? Not allowed. Troll land. You leave now.’

‘Not going to happen,’ returned Tag. ‘We’ve come to talk to the pile of rags in the locked cage over there.’ He pointed at what they suspected was Grannus.

The troll shook his head violently, spraying out bits of drool as he did. ‘That not pile rags. That thief. We lock him up. No food. Only water. Punish him.’

‘Oh well, his punishment is over now, we need him. So, stand aside or I’m gonna get medieval on your ass.’

‘My ass?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why? What my ass done?’

‘It’s just an expression,’ said Tag.

‘Is stupid expression. Your ass stupid.’

Merlin suppressed a chuckle. Tag was getting some of his own medicine as he attempted to conduct a conversation made up of random thoughts and non sequiturs.

‘Hell, this is going nowhere,’ snapped the big man. ‘Look, I challenge you to combat. If I win, we take the bundle of rags. If not, we leave.’

The troll nodded. ‘Is good plan. No ass involved.’

‘Could you please shut up about ass?’ asked Tag.

‘Okay, but you started it,’ grumped the troll.

Tag started to limber up, swinging his ax back and forth to loosen his shoulder muscles.

‘What you do?’ asked the troll.

‘Getting ready.’

The troll shook his head. ‘We no fight you. You made challenge. Rules say, I choose who I fight.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Yes,’ confirmed the troll. ‘It is seriously.’

‘Okay, who do you choose?’

‘I choose fight little girl,’ he pointed at Emily and laughed.

‘That’s unfair,’ observed Tag.

‘Don’t care fair,’ said the troll. ‘Me fight little girl.’

‘I mean, it’s not fair on you,’ said Tag. ‘Trust me, you do not want to fight Emily.’

‘Tag,’ said Merlin. ‘Let him fight who he wants. Just hurry things along, we don’t have forever. Places to go, vampires to kill and all that.’

The troll looked puzzled. ‘Very old man no care we kill little girl?’

‘I’ve about had enough of this old man crap,’ snapped Merlin.

‘You are relatively old,’ interjected the Prof.

‘So are you.’

‘Yes, and I am not denying it.’

‘Whatever. Emily, front and center. Kill this idiot and then we take Grannus and go home.’

‘Do I have to kill him?’

‘All fight is to death,’ said the troll. ‘Less is cowardice. Get ready to die, little girl.’

Emily stepped forward, bringing forth Deathwalker as she did.

The troll raised his massive spiked club high.

But before he could bring it down, Emily had already swung her ax twice.

There was a shocked hush as the huge troll’s head slid slowly off his shoulders. Then his bifurcated body split in two and fell apart.

One of the other trolls walked up and, using his club, pushed at the big troll’s remains. Then he nodded. ‘He is dead. Little girl wins fight. You may take thief person.’

Latobias stepped forward. ‘Thank you,’ he said. Then he led the team into the village, towards the locked cage. ‘Grannus,’ he shouted as they approached. ‘It is I, Latobias. I sally forth with Sirona, goddess of the healing waters, and Belenas, former god of laughter, now the god of not feeling very happy.’

‘God of being depressed, by gosh and cheese whiz,’ interjected Belenas.

‘Yes, that,’ acknowledged Latobias.

The pile of unwashed laundry stirred, coughed wetly, snorted and stood up.

It was the widest man Emily had ever seen. Also, one of the shortest.

Grannus stood a touch under four feet tall (or short). But the most remarkable thing about him was his breadth of shoulders. They were almost as wide as he was high. Arms like tree trunks with boulders attached and legs like church pillars. His unkempt beard hung to his navel and his hair stuck out like the proverbial haystack.

She could also smell him from where she stood. A sour blend of body odor, unwashed clothes, reeking feet and stale alcohol. It literally made her want to retch.

He could have used skunk spray as a cologne and it would have been a marked improvement.

Scratching busily at his nether regions, he stared baleful at the whole team.

Then he belched.

‘Bugger off,’ he rumbled. ‘Lousy bunch of has-beens and do gooders. Leave me alone. Ha,’ he addressed Belenas. ‘You think you’re depressed, you incompetent fake-sweary moron. That’s nothing. Try

walking in my shoes for a couple of hundred years, I'll show you depressed.' He belched again, then looked at Merlin and the Prof.

'Wizard. Professor,' he greeted them. 'Got any liquor on you, I've run dry?'

The Prof delved into his jacket pocket, took out a small pottery flask and threw it to the god of shiny things.

He caught it, pulled the stopper off and took a tentative sniff. 'What is it?'

'Rubbing alcohol.'

Grannus shrugged. 'That'll do.'

He downed the flask in one, shuddered and tossed the empty back. 'So, what are you lot doing here?' he asked Merlin.

'Usual stuff,' answered the wizard. 'Saving the world, killing vampires, same-old, same-old.'

'We're getting the band back together,' said Sirona.

'Sirona, you're an idiot,' snapped Grannus.

But Emily saw his eyes belie his utterances as he looked at the tall, goddess with genuine affection.

'Listen, Grannus,' Sirona continued. 'Are you in, or out? You can lie here in your own filth, wallowing in self-pity, or you can do what Belenas and I have done. Suck it up and get back in the game. Come on, you filthy dwarf, what's it going to be?'

'I'm not a dwarf,' denied the god of shiny things. 'You lot are simply abnormally tall. As is almost everybody else.'

Sirona stamped her foot.

'Okay,' conceded Grannus. 'Don't have a thrombosis. I'm in, got nothing better to do anyway.'

'Wait,' said Emily. 'I'll ask one of the Trolls to fetch the key.'

'No need,' said Grannus as he grabbed two of the thick steel bars and pulled. They deformed in his hands like wet noodles as he parted them and stepped through.

Even Tag was impressed at the god's casual display of strength. The bars were as thick as a man's wrist and even the big man would have had to put in some serious effort to pull them apart like that.

'I don't get it,' said Troy. 'If you could get out at any time, why didn't you?'

Grannus shrugged. 'You ever been bored before, boy?'

'Of course,' confirmed Troy.

'Try being bored for a few centuries. You start doing the darndest things to relieve that feeling.'

'So, the god of shiny things,' noted Emily.

Grannus looked at her. 'What?'

'Nothing, just saying. Apart from your prodigious strength, what else can you do?'

‘I can refrain from asking stupid questions, child,’ snapped Grannus. ‘And that is only one of the things I bring to the party.’

‘Grannus can control light,’ said the Prof. ‘It’s a part of the whole shiny thing worship.’

‘Control light?’ questioned Muller.

Grannus sighed, lifted his right hand and unleashed a white-hot ray of light. It impacted one of the ramshackle huts, causing it to burst into flames.

‘Hey,’ shouted one of the trolls. ‘Stinky man burns my house down.’

‘Dammit,’ cussed Grannus. ‘Here,’ he called out to the newly homeless troll. ‘Have some shiny things.’

A small pile of diamonds appeared at the troll’s feet.

‘Ooh – shiny things,’ he said. His temporary homelessness forgotten and forgiven in favor of his new-found wealth.

‘Come on,’ said Grannus wearily. ‘I’ve had enough of this. Let’s go.’

‘Hold on,’ interjected Sirona. ‘One thing, just before we go anywhere.’

She gestured and a waterfall of fragrant water cascaded down on Grannus’s head, scouring him clean and eliminating his foul stench.

‘Blasted woman,’ he yelled. ‘Do you have any idea how long it took me to develop a proper stink?’

‘Tough,’ replied Sirona. ‘From here on out, Grannus is coming up smelling of roses.’

‘Bitch.’

She laughed. ‘I love you too.’

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CHAPTER 39

The newest hotel in Las Vegas boasted a wall of currency they called the *Hundred Million Dollar Wall*.

It was a collage of various types of currency used throughout the ages, ranging from a single Solomon Islands Rai Stone – a massive limestone disc weighing in at over a ton, through to Chinese Qi knives, Mongolian Tea Blocks, Katanga Crosses, Mesopotamian Golden Shekels, Silver Dollars, every form of paper currency that ever existed. And – three Silver Roman Sestertii.

Was the combined value of the currencies worth a hundred million dollars?

Perhaps, if one adjusted it all according to inflation.

But probably not.

However, it made for great selfies and was exactly the sort of thing that Vegas was famous for.

To Arend – the answer was yes. Those three coins were worth every bit of a hundred million.

Once again, the cyber twins had proven their almost supernatural ability to track things down. In all fairness, over the last two weeks, Arend and his two compatriots had chased down three false leads.

An art installation in Baden Baden.

A private collector in Holland.

And a safe deposit box in a bank in Sweden.

All three of the leads had resulted in them finding silver Sestertii.

But none of them had been a part of the *Triginta*.

These three coins, however, were the real deal. Arend could feel the power throbbing through his system, even from behind the silken rope that kept onlookers back from the exhibit.

Now he simply had to figure out how to get his hands on them.

There was the obvious option. Full scale, over the top magical violence. But he knew that this was not London, England. The police here carried guns. As did most of the private security. And a good deal of the local population.

So, although it was indeed an option, it was definitely a last resort.

‘Should we blast everyone and take the coins?’ asked Remer in a stage whisper.

Arend sighed. Seriously, sometimes it was dealing with a hyperactive infant. And no amount of finger trimming seemed to make any difference. The moment the digit grew back, Remer forgot the

point of the lesson.

'Idiot,' breathed Arend as he turned and walked away from the wall. 'Shut up and follow me. Both of you.'

He headed for the exit, gesturing for the doorman to hail a limo as he did. It was time for some out of the box thinking.

***

Tommy Little was living it large.

Ten years ago, he had risen to the top of the hierarchy in the tough world of Las Vegas petty crime.

He had achieved this in two ways.

Firstly, he never treaded on the big boy's toes, staying clear of gambling, protection, prostitution and grand theft auto. Instead, he controlled the bottom feeders. King of the pickpockets. Mugging, petty theft, begging and shoplifting were his ports of call.

And, secondly, he and his 2IC, Bill – just Bill, no second name – used a disproportionate level of violence to enforce their will on all who entered their orbit.

Criminals who trespassed on their patch suffered broken limbs and fractured skulls. Tommy saw this as a necessary part of his business model.

Bill, however, was keen to visit pain upon anyone for pretty much any reason whatsoever. His job involved a surfeit of violence, and he was a man who loved his job.

Now both Bill and Tommy were experiencing things from the other side of the desk, as it were.

Arend had decided that he would use the petty gangster to provide a diversion while he and his purloined the *Triginta* coins from the wall.

'Stop whimpering,' Arend scolded Bill. 'After all, it will grow back.'

Tommy stared open mouthed at the *Hulder* mage. 'No, it won't.'

Arend frowned. 'Oh yes, I forgot. You people don't regenerate.'

Bill was currently curled up on the floor in the fetal position, mewling softly, the ruined remains of his left hand clutched to his chest.

You see, Bill had blundered.

When Arend introduced himself, and informed Tommy that they were going to have a chat about how he was going to serve the *Hulder*, Bill had shown a marked amount of disrespect. He called Arend an upstart, an idiot and a man looking for a beating.

So, Arend merged a sphere of air with the gangster's left hand and, with a thought, caused it to exploded. The results were quite spectacular. Bill's hand turned into a mist of blood and bone chips, leaving a ragged, bleeding stump.

Both Mist and Remer had gone into such paroxysms of laughter they had to sit down to recover.

'Right, mister Little,' said Arend as he leaned back in the chair that had, until very recently, been Tommy Little's. 'I have a job for you. And by job, I don't mean you will be paid. Not as such, however, if you carry out my instructions in an appropriate and acceptable way, then I shall not reduce your cranium to the same state as that idiot's hand. Do you understand what I am saying to you?'

Tommy nodded.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, sir. Do what you say or you gonna pulp my head.'

Arend smiled. 'Good lad, well put. For the gods' sakes, Remer, shut that moaning moron up,' yelled Arend as Bill let out a particularly loud squeal of agony.

Remer stood over the whimpering gangster, twirled his finger and then released a small fireball.

The sphere of burning plasma rocketed into Bill's left ear, sizzling and sputtering as it burned its way in.

This caused the gangster to give voice to a high-pitched wail of agony.

'Remer, stop playing with him,' snapped Arend.

'Sorry,' apologized the warrior mage as he used a gesture to explode the plasma. With a festive sounding pop, Bill's head disintegrated. Such was the heat of the fireball, there was little mess as the wound was immediately cauterized. Bill jerked spasmodically a few times and then went limp.

Mist leaned over the body and nodded. 'Neat,' she said. 'His head looks like an empty bowl.'

'Thanks,' preened Remer. 'Took a bit of control that. Nice to see it's appreciated.'

Tommy looked like he was going to faint. Up until now, he had always considered himself to be a hard man. Born and bred on the streets and fought his way up using violence as a tool.

But now he realized, he was a rank amateur. What he saw as violence, he now knew to be merely spirited high jinks in the scheme of things. Playground thuggery, as opposed to the true casually evil artistry that was happening in front of him.

'Tell me what I must do, Master, and please don't explode my head.'

'It's simple,' said Arend. 'I am going to commit a felony. There are some coins on the hundred-million-dollar wall that I wish to own. However, security is tight.'

'And they have guns,' interjected Remer.

Arend stared at his *Hulder* compatriot.

'What?' asked Remer. 'I didn't use dorky language. It's not like I

said, Boom wands or Thunder sticks, I was just pointing out they were armed.'

'Remer.'

'Master.'

'Shut it. Now, as I was saying, mister Little. I am going to need a diversion. And a quite serious one at that.'

Of course, sir,' groveled Tommy. 'What were you thinking?'

'Explosions. Lots of noise. General carnage and mayhem. Most probably, strap a bomb to someone and get them to blow it up in the casino. That should detract any attention from the wall.'

'You mean, like a terrorist attack? That's not very American, sir. And who would we get to do it. As far as I know, Jihadists are a bit thin on the ground in Vegas.'

'I wouldn't worry about that,' replied Arend. 'After all, you will be the one carrying the bomb.'

'Hold on,' blurted Tommy. 'No ways. I'd rather get my head exploded than my whole body. Not that it makes much difference in the end, admittedly. But killing all those innocent people. I don't think so.'

'As I already stated,' contained Arend, unabashed at Tommy's refusal. 'Don't worry about it. You will be doing it, regardless. Because, you see, mister Little, you shall have no choice in the matter.'

And the Master mage recited one of his more powerful spells, gesturing with both hands while doing so.

Tommy decided this was most probably the best time to make a break for it, what with the whole, becoming a human bomb thing in his short-term future.

But as he tensed his muscles, preparing to leg it, a waterfall of purple and red motes of light cascaded down on him. Some of the particles burned like fire, others juddered like electrical energy, and some sent ice cold waves rippling through him.

At the end of the light show, he was frozen. Unable to move a muscle. Even his eyes were stuck staring straight ahead. He could breathe, but that was it.

'We call that spell, the *Dominopupa*,' said Arend. 'In human speak I suppose it might translate as, Puppet Master. Basically, it means you are now enslaved to me. Utterly and completely. For example, raise your left leg.'

Tommy complied.

'Raise your right hand, and make it into a fist.'

Again, instant compliance.

'Now punch yourself in the mouth until I tell you to stop.

Tommy proceeded to beat the crap out of himself while Arend

watched dispassionately, and Mist and Arend once again went apoplectic with mirth.

***

Tommy Little was no longer living it large.

Instead, he was standing in the center of the casino, some sixty yards from the Hundred-million-dollar-wall, wearing a long linen coat and sweating like an elephant seal in a sauna.

He was utterly exhausted. Not only from the constant terror of having being turned into a human bomb, but also from his repeated attempts to break the Puppet Master spell and run away. But every time he tried, he failed. Plus, he had now developed such a vicious migraine that he almost welcomed his imminent demise. Almost.

Tommy wondered what the bomb strapped to his torso was made of. It was the size of an A4 piece of paper, but maybe an inch thick. Didn't seem to have any wires leading to it, nor did it smell like C4. Most likely, it was some weird spell driven thing that these evil, non-human heathens had put together.

He felt like weeping. Only yesterday he had been a king. Okay, a king of an admittedly crappy fiefdom, but now he was about to become a pile of human hamburger. And that truly sucked.

He wondered if he would go to heaven. After all, notwithstanding the odd torture. And murder. He was still a Catholic boy. He even went to church, sometimes. Okay, once, for his sister's wedding.

So, maybe.

The bomb thing went beep.

Then boom.

Tommy looked around him. He appeared to be standing in a cave. Darkness all about. The air redolent with the stench of brimstone.

'Where am I?' he asked.

'I'll give you a hint,' rumbled a voice that sounded like fingernails scraping down a coffin lid. 'You're not in Heaven.'

At that same exact moment, Arend had just opened a portal and he, Mist, and Remer, were leaving Las Vegas and transferring themselves to a nearby private airfield.

They had taken the three silver *Triginta* sestertii.

But they had left the rest of the currencies. And the remains of mister Tommy Little.

Because what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. Or something like that. Arend never really understood the saying.

Now Belikov had ten coins.

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CHAPTER 40

‘I had truly forgotten how unbelievably stupid Orcs are,’ sighed the Morrigan.

Balor shrugged. ‘Try dealing with trolls.’

‘Trolls are simple,’ said the Morrigan. ‘That is different to stupid. They are well aware of their limitations. Orcs, however, are so dense, they think they aren’t. And that is true imbecility.’

‘True,’ admitted Balor. ‘But be wary of true stupidity. It is unshakable. Like granite, it is hard and resistant to attack.’

The Morrigan snorted. ‘We will see about that. How do I challenge these morons?’

‘It’s easy, simply walk into their camp. They will do the rest. And don’t worry, I shall be right behind you. As shall my Fomorians.’

The Orcs were a nomadic species. Not for them the daily grind of growing crops and tending cattle. They left that to the lesser beings. Then they simply took it away.

War was everything to an Orc. It was the only way to prove one’s worth in their society. It was the only way to feed your family and to gain respect.

To an Orc, battle was akin to shopping. You wanted an item; you took your shield and mace and went and got it.

And contrary to many of the current versions of Orcs and Orcish society, the females of the species do not participate in these battles. Unlike the men, who are built like brick outhouses and possessed of a similar intellect as said long drop, the females are slighter, almost delicate, and twice as bright. Which is to say, still dumb, but not terminally so.

But even the females topped the Morrigan by at least a foot in height and a couple of hundred pounds in weight. The males were over four times her size.

As opposed to her usual, Old Hag visage, the Morrigan had assumed her comely young girl appearance. She wore a figure-hugging red dress, the sides slit to reveal shapely legs. On her feet, light leather sandals. In her hair, a matching red, silk ribbon.

Her only concession to combat, was a short Gladius strapped to a leather belt that hung loosely over her hips.

‘Listen up,’ she shouted as she approached the camp. ‘Who’s the head honcho? I demand The Right of Conquest.’

There was a flurry of movement as Orcish heads popped out of

tents, warriors stopped sparring and women stopped carrying. They all turned to stare at the insane human who had entered their camp and challenged their chief.

A particularly large Orc exited one of the tents, threw back his head and roared.

It was impressive. Loud enough to shake the very earth they stood upon.

'You dare challenge, Zogarth?' he bellowed. 'You just weak girly human. Zogarth strongest of strong. He smashes you to small puddle of squishy stuff, no problem.'

Zogarth swung his mace high and battered the ground with it in a demonstration of his squishing capabilities.

'Yes, very impressive, big boy,' scoffed the Morrigan. 'I demand The Right of Conquest; do you accept the challenge?'

Zogarth howled with laughter. Genuinely amused. 'Is no challenge. Is stupid. But I accept stupid girl's stupid thing.'

The Morrigan shook her head. 'Lot of stupid's in that sentence, Zogarth. Including the one shouting at me. However, regardless of whether you consider it a challenge or not, the lore states you have to accept, or forfeit. Now, if you are afraid of me, I understand. You can simply forfeit your right and I will gain control of your warriors. What say you?'

'Zogarth laugh at silly girl. Ha. And even ha ha. I accept worthless stupid challenge.'

He hefted his shield onto his left arm, adjusted his grip on his massive mace and stepped forward into the open area in front of his tent.

By now, most of the encampment were gathered around, more puzzled than excited. After all, why was this tiny human in a red dress committing suicide by Orc? Humans were very strange.

'Hey, Crow Woman,' shouted Balor. 'Make a show of it. And don't use magic. It's forbidden.'

The Morrigan sneered. 'As if I need it.'

Zogarth opened with the classic Orcish overhand blow, mace screeching through the air as he looked to crush his opposition with one fell swoop.

The Morrigan stepped aside without any visible effort, drawing her Gladius as she did. Then, with a casual flick, she opened a deep cut in Zogarth's right forearm.

The Orc reacted by whipping his mace sideways, seeking to smash the Morrigan's feet out from under her.

Instead, she leaped lightly over the weapon and, with another deceptively casual flick, opened a wound on Zogarth's chest, the razor-sharp short sword slicing easily through the Orc's leather armor

and deeply into his pectoral muscles.

The huge Orc looked puzzled more than worried. He glanced briefly at his mace and then his shield, as if to check they were both still there, then, in true Orcish fashion, he swung for the fences once more.

The Morrigan ducked and let the mace whistle harmlessly over her head.

And again, the Gladius snaked out and bit deep. This time she plunged it into the back of Zogarth's right leg.

A few of the Orc's applauded the move, stomping their horny feet and banging their maces against their shields.

'Stop clap little girl,' shouted the chief. 'She no can defeat Zogarth. Me is too good. She just lucky stupid.'

'Enough with the stupid, you bone headed mouth breather,' quipped the Morrigan as she spun around and sliced a chunk of flesh from Zogarth's left shoulder.

From that moment on, the battle degenerated into an extremely violent, bloody, carnival side-show.

Zogarth attacked. The Morrigan slid out of the way and carved pieces off the lumbering giant warrior. Rinse and repeat *ad nauseum*.

After twenty minutes, Zogarth stood still. He could no longer raise his arms and blood streamed off him like he was in a devil's shower room. His leather armor was in tatters, and his flesh hung off him like a beggar's rags.

The rest of the Orcs had stopped cheering and applauding. Now they simply looked on in silence. Zogarth's leadership had been tarnished to such a depth that even if he survived this contest, he would no longer be welcomed in the tribe.

What Orcish lore lacks in fairness, it makes up for in harshness.

'Little girl too hard to hit,' pointed Zogarth. 'She like buzzing fly with little spiteful knife.' He went down on one knee. 'Time for lucky girl to finish it. Put silly knife into Zogarth's eye. Make done.'

Without hesitation, the Morrigan stepped forward and did exactly as Zogarth asked. The Gladius punched through the Orc's eye with an audible pop. Then it continued on into his walnut sized brain.

The Morrigan wiggled it about a little, for good measure, and then withdrew it and held the bloody blade above her head,

'I claim right of conquest,' she declared.

As one, the Orcs fell to their knees.

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CHAPTER 41

Quinton lowered his rifle and looked up from his prone position. ‘Half minute of angle,’ he said with a slight smirk. ‘Now that’s what I call shooting.’

He was referring to the fact he had just shot a grouping of under four inches at eight hundred yards.

Emily frowned.

‘What?’ asked the legionnaire. ‘You not impressed?’

‘We don’t go in much for long distance shooting,’ replied Emily. ‘The vamps move too fast for any shot over a few yards away.’

‘Not when I’m shooting,’ said Quinton. ‘Hey, that’s why you hired the experts. We can’t all pull off shots like that.’

A couple of his men chuckled. They knew he was being cocky, but it was exemplary shooting. And their Commandant was known for his sniping prowess.

Emily held her hand out. ‘Reload and pass me the rifle.’

Quinton raised an eyebrow, ejected the empty and slotted in a new, full thirty round box mag. Then he handed the FAMAS G2 rifle over.

‘You want me to shift?’ he asked Emily.

Emily shook her head. ‘No, I’ll shoot off-hand.’

This time one of the men laughed openly.

Emily didn’t react, she simply brought the rifle up to her shoulder, sighted and fired. Three shots a second for ten seconds.

She nodded to herself. ‘Nice weapon,’ she said. ‘Great balance.’

She handed it back to Quinton.

The legionaries stared open mouthed at the target. In the exact center there was a ragged hole, perhaps an inch in diameter. Probably a little smaller.

‘I said, we don’t much go in for long range shooting,’ she said. ‘I did not say we couldn’t do it. Now, gentlemen, the reason I am here is to take your training to the next level. I know you have just finished two weeks of hell with Master Ben Chu, and he says, in his words, you lot are the toughest sons of female dogs he has ever come across.’

She allowed the legionnaires their chuckles at that.

‘But now, Tag, Muller, Troy and I, are going to show you how to kill vampires.’

Tag stepped forward, high stepping slightly as the snow was about a foot deep. ‘How we gonna do this, girly?’ her asked.

‘Who are your best at hand-to-hand?’ she asked Quinton.

‘Besides me, Jacques, Stefan and Jefferson.’

Emily picked up a rucksack, opened it and took out three machetes. The eighteen-inch blades glowed subtly in the weak winter sun.

‘Silver plated,’ she said as she handed one to each of the men Quinton had nominated. ‘These are often our preferred weapon against the *Nosferatu*. Particularly when we get close. They do significant damage, particularly as they are silver coated, they never run out of ammo and never jam.’

‘We have been trained extensively in most forms of knife fighting,’ interjected the Commandant.

Emily nodded. ‘That’s good. Now, you three, attack Tag. Do not hold back. Try your very best to do him harm.’

None of the men moved. Instead, they looked at their Commandant, their expressions a mixture of confusion and disbelief.

‘But he is not even armed,’ said one of the men.

Quinton shrugged. ‘Hey,’ he said. ‘I’m your Commandant, but Emily is your leader. So, the next time she gives you an order and you hesitate, or look to me for confirmation, I swear on my word as a Legionnaire, I will tear you a new asshole. Understood?’

‘Yes, sir!’ shouted the legionnaires in perfect unison.

As one and without further ado, they attacked Tag.

It was three on one. And apart from their obvious numerical advantage, the legionnaires were well trained, fit, fast, strong and all were veterans of many close combat situations.

Tag used his new-found speed to dodge almost all of their efforts, stepping and weaving and turning. But they were good. Very good.

Eventually, one of the machete’s found its mark, slicing deeply into Tag’s right shoulder. Blood sprayed from the wound as the big man dropped and rolled away.

Sensing an advantage, the legionnaires redoubled their efforts, stabbing and swinging with deadly concentration.

But to their enormous surprise, they saw Tag’s deep wound heal over almost instantly.

At the same time, Emily called out to him. ‘That’s enough,’ she shouted. ‘Quit messing around, we’re here to see you fight, not dance.’

Tag grinned.

And shifted up a gear.

That was when the legionnaires realized the big man had simply being toying with them. His speed increased geometrically and what was fast become a mere blur of movement. Fists and elbows struck out, noses were bloodied, eyes blackened and, after a few seconds, all three of the attackers lay on the snow.

Tag held their machetes in his left hand.

He was still smiling.

There was a murmur of disbelief amongst the soldiers.

'Tag,' said Emily.

'Yes, ma'am.'

'You are extremely fast.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Too fast for those legionnaires, it seems.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Are you faster than a vampire?'

Tag shook his head. 'No, ma'am. Not even close.'

Emily turned to face the soldiers. 'Now you have an idea what we are up against.'

'How do we beat them?' asked one of the men Tag had just downed. 'No one can fight anything that fast.'

Emily smiled. 'Ask your Commandant. He killed a couple.'

The men turned to look at Quinton.

'Tell them,' said Emily.

'I anticipated,' said Quinton. 'They were too fast for me, so I just figured where they were going to be, instead of reacting to where I thought they were.'

'And that's how you do it,' said Emily. 'It's part skill, part guesswork and part luck. Sometimes, you just got to roll the dice when you're fighting these monsters.'

'Is that what you do?' asked Quinton.

Emily shook her head. Then she moved. It was like trick photography. Smoke and mirrors. The snow whirled up in a mini tornado accompanied with a thunderclap of moving air.

And the Shadowhunter was standing behind the Legionnaires. Some twenty feet away.

Then, with another explosion of movement, she was back where she started.

There was a chorus of muttered cuss words and a general shaking of heads,

'Well, I guess we're not in Kansas anymore, fellows,' quipped Quinton. 'So, we're slow, weak, don't miraculously heal and we can't use our firearms because the vampires can dodge bullets. I must be honest; I'm beginning to wonder what we can bring to the party.'

'Don't belittle yourselves,' said Emily. 'After we've trained you and equipped you, you will be able to take out any vamp you want. It's all about technique and experience. For example, I didn't say you can't use firearms, I merely said, you got to wait until you can see the whites of their eyes. Or red, as the case may be, Then, when you get real close…'

Emily drew her two Desert Eagle .357 magnums, drew a bead on a tree some seven feet from them and pulled the triggers.

The custom magazines held nine rounds each, and Emily cranked them out at almost six a second. So, in just under two seconds, using both pistols, she hammered eighteen rounds into a two-inch circle on the tree.

'.357 rounds, silver tipped, custom mags, full compensators and suppression.' She replaced the magazine and handed one to Quinton.

The Commandant hefted the pistol a couple of times, aimed at the tree and cranked off a few rounds.

Then he grinned. 'I like.'

'And that is just a small sample,' said Emily. 'We got auto shotguns, grenades filled with silver shrapnel, UV lights, Holy Water, although that only works for Muller. Loads of stuff. And we will teach you how to go hand-to-hand with the blood suckers as well. Just because you are human, does not mean you are weak. Trust me.'

'I do, ma'am,' said Quinton. Then he brought his fist to his chest in a salute. 'Command us. We are yours.'

'Thank you,' said Emily, returning the salute.

The rest of the legionnaires followed suite, slamming their fists against their chests and crying out in union.

'Honneur et Fidélité pour Emily.'

Honor and fidelity.

They were telling Emily – their loyalty, their honor, and their lives, were hers to command.

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CHAPTER 42

A shaft of burning plasma scorched through the air and impacted with the side of the mountain. A geyser of steam billowed up as the snow instantly hit boiling point.

'That is awesome,' yelled Quinton. 'It's like an artillery strike. Do it again. Shoot those trees.'

Grannus shook his head. 'I'm out. One shot, that's all. Back in the day I could do crap like that for hours. Now, not enough worship for more than one, maybe two a day. Anyway, what you got against those trees.'

'Nothing, just a target. Could just as well have been those rocks over there,' answered Quinton.

'Boy, you some sort of biophobe? You hate nature?'

'No, sir,' responded Quinton with a puzzled look. 'Not at all. Just picking out inanimate objects to blast.'

'Well don't,' said the god. 'Hey, do you want some shiny things?'

The Commandant shook his head. 'No thank you.'

'Heathen,' snapped Grannus as he turned and walked away.

In the background, Tag, Troy and Muller were taking the rest of the legionnaires through some close combat training.

'Keep moving,' shouted Troy. 'To pause is to die. Never stop. And be unpredictable. Do not follow set combat moves, do not use prescribed combinations. Mix. Match. Drop, roll, jump. Use your elbows, knees, heads.'

The three hunters all carried six-foot-long staffs, *ala* Master Ben Chu, and they used them to swat any soldier who stopped moving as they sparred against each other.

'Hey,' yelped Jacques as Troy smacked him across the back of his head. 'What was that for?'

'Hesitation.'

'Less than half a second,' argued Jacques.

'A vamp can tear your throat out in less than half a second,' said Troy. 'He can strike you six times in a fraction of that time. You hesitate, you die. Now carry on.'

'Sir,' shouted Jacques as he continued fighting.

Troy grinned at Tag and Muller. He knew they were being harsh, but the hunters were actually hugely impressed with the legionnaires. They were tough, well trained and pushed themselves to the limit at everything they did.

As a result, they were improving faster than the hunters thought possible.

Merlin wandered over. ‘Where’s Emily?’

‘She took the Prof and they’re setting up some sort of magical firearms training run,’ answered Troy. ‘You know, a combat alley, but with magic instead of pull up targets and springs.’

The wizard watched for a few minutes while the hunters continued punishing any soldier that paused or was too slow.

‘They’re good,’ he commented.

‘Very,’ admitted Troy. ‘How’s it going with the gods. I see Quinton was trying to do some team training with them. He said he wanted to form a god-squad. Like a super attack team.’

‘It’s an absolute disaster,’ answered Merlin. ‘Mind you, I knew it would be, but sometimes it is best to let someone learn the folly of their ideas by themselves.’

‘Why, what’s going wrong?’

Merlin chuckled. ‘You have to ask why four worship-hungry, egocentric, hyper-powerful beings can’t play well together? To a god, the height of teamwork is not destroying another deity’s followers. Asking them to participate in a fire-and-movement exercise while attempting to minimize collateral damage, is like asking a starving Pitbull not to eat a pound of dropped hamburger.’

In the distance Troy heard a loud bellow, followed by the sound of a tree falling.

‘Ass on a stinking stick. Fore,’ shouted the voice.

‘Ah, that would be Belenas,’ observed Merlin. ‘He’s using his hammer to smash trees down.’

‘Why?’

‘He says it’s training, however, I suspect he’s doing it to upset Grannus. Grannus likes trees.’

A massive windstorm blew up in an instant, smothering Belenas in tons of snow. The wind was closely followed by a jet of steaming water, redolent with the smell of sulfur, that melted the snow away.

‘And, now Latobias and Sirona have joined in.’ He rubbed his temples with his fingers and sighed. ‘I’d forgotten how much I hate working with deities. Really, it’s like trying to control a bunch of hyperactive toddlers.’

‘Hey, what’s with the gods messing up the mountainside?’ asked Emily as she walked over, her arm linked with the Prof’s.

‘Idiots,’ shouted Merlin, throwing his arms up and storming away.

‘What’s got his goat?’ asked Emily.

The Prof chuckled. ‘He hates working with the gods, it’s just been a while and he forgot.’

‘Will they be of any use?’ asked Emily.

The Prof shrugged. ‘They hate the *Nosferatu*. How they react, that is anyone’s guess. But if pushed I would have to say, on balance, they should do more good than harm. So, yes, they will be a help, most likely in ways you would never expect.’

‘And that’s about all we can ask for,’ noted Emily. ‘Hey, guys,’ she continued. ‘After you’ve finished hitting the legionnaires with sticks, I would like to give them a bit of rapid-fire weapons training.’

‘Might as well,’ said Tag. ‘I wanna go and help Belenas knock down trees.’

‘I wouldn’t recommend that,’ advised the Prof. ‘Unless you want a jet of water up your … umm … well, just don’t.’

‘Come on, soldiers,’ commanded Emily. ‘Time to go shooting.’

There was a collective sigh of relief as the legionnaires stopped pummeling each other. A few of them rubbed ruefully at the welts left from the oak staffs.

They formed up and followed Emily, marching together and singing in cadence.

Dans la brume la rocaille
Légionnaire que vous combattez
Malgré l'ennemi, la balle de raisin
Légionnaire, vous gagnerez.

Emily translated in her mind.

In the mist and over the mountains, and through the enemy’s cannon and shot. We are legionnaires and we will win.

‘Oorah!’ she muttered to herself.

***

‘Full auto,’ said Emily. ‘Always full auto.’

‘Difficult to control with full auto,’ noted Jacques.

‘Yes,’ admitted Emily. ‘But it’s full auto or die. You have to fill the vamp with silver, it’s the only way to bring them down using a firearm. And you need to practice quick reloads. Fire, swop out empty mag, reload. Must happen in under a third of a second. I know it sounds impossible, but it can be done.’

‘We’re just human,’ said Quinton.

Emily chuckled. ‘No, you’re not,’ she said. ‘You are Legionnaires.’

‘*Valeur et discipline*,’ the men shouted in union. ‘Valor and discipline.’

‘We drink, we fight, we die,’ returned Quinton.

Emily nodded. She liked the way the legionnaires thought. It reminded her of the Pack motto. *To live is to suffer. To suffer is to live.*

‘Right,’ she shouted. Reload. Let’s do it again.’

***

‘One can never say a unit is perfect,’ said Emily as she sat at the table. ‘But my boys are as close as any humans could get.’

‘Your boys?’ questioned Troy with a slight smile.

Emily nodded. ‘My legionnaires.’

‘Piles of hairy dog snot,’ yelled Belenas, who was sitting opposite her. ‘Stop trying to crack walnuts with your hammer.’

‘I like cracking walnuts,’ returned Grannus.

‘You’re making walnut paste, not walnuts,’ noted Sirona. ‘And you’re just conjuring the nuts out of fresh air, so why don’t you just conjure up ones without shells. After you’ve hit it with your hammer there’s nothing left. You can’t eat that.’

‘Don’t want to eat it,’ snapped Grannus. ‘Got a nut allergy.’

‘Well why are you making walnuts?’ asked Latobias.

Grannus shrugged. ‘I like hitting them with my hammer.’

‘That’s it,’ shouted Merlin. ‘Enough. Any more of your petty bickering and you will have to answer to me.’

Belenas stood up and bellowed. ‘You dare to threaten a god?’

‘Obviously,’ replied the ancient wizard.

No one spoke for a while.

Then the god of being depressed, shrugged. ‘Fair enough.’

The rest of the gods laughed loudly.

Merlin sat down and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands.

‘Gods,’ he said. ‘I hate them.’

‘You’ll be happy when it comes to the killing part of this whole adventure,’ said Sirona.

‘And the getting to places really quickly,’ added Latobias.

‘You know something,’ interjected the Prof. ‘I’ve been thinking. I’m not sure we’re going about this the right way. Maybe, instead of finding vampires to kill, we should be seeking out the *Triginta*. That way, we can ensure Belikov does not get his hands on it.’

‘Fine,’ agreed Merlin. ‘You can do that as well. Grannus, you’re the god of shiny things. You know much about the *Triginta*?’

‘Sure,’ answered the god. ‘Haven’t heard anything about it for a few hundred years, but I’m sure if I put my ears to the ground, I could pick up something.’

‘Great, help the Prof. Meanwhile, I’m going to bed before you lot make me wish I wasn’t immortal.’

The team mumbled their goodnights as Merlin left the room.

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CHAPTER 43

‘This is not what we initially agreed upon,’ stated Balor, his single eye glistening in the moonlight.

‘I do not recall agreeing to anything,’ replied the Morrigan.

Balor didn’t reply. This whole affair was starting to escalate far beyond what he had expected. At first, it was one Orc tribe. Then the Morrigan had insisted she needed more troops. So, she had gone on to issue the Right of Conquest challenge to a further two tribes, defeating them as easily as she had the first.

Now she had almost three hundred Orcish warriors under her direct command.

‘I don’t understand the logic behind this,’ Balor admitted. ‘Surely, this will bring down the wrath of the Winter Queen on us. After all, we will be killing her subjects.’

The Morrigan stared at the cyclops for a few seconds, wondering if she should bother to explain her plan. Finally, she acquiesced.

‘Fine, you know the whole reason we are doing this, the end game, is to exterminate Merlin and that awful girl child?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, to do that, we need to confront them.’

‘Obviously,’ agreed Balor.

‘How do you advise we accomplish that?’

Balor shrugged. The question seemed unnecessary. The answer was obvious.

‘We find them, attack them, kill them,’ he answered.

The Morrigan shook her head. ‘How? How do we find them? They could be literally anywhere on earth. And the human realm is very difficult to search. As well as that, they may not even be on earth. Merlin could have moved them to another plane, a separate dimension. No, it would be next to impossible.’

Balor nodded, appreciating the enormity of the task. ‘I don’t get it,’ he said. ‘How will attacking innocent Fae villages help?’

‘If there is one thing I know about Emily Hawk, she is an obsessive goody-two-shoes. You see, we will make it known that the reason we are destroying these villages is because of her. Only she can stop it. As soon as she finds out, she will come. It will be a moral imperative for her.’

‘So, we kill people, tell them we will only stop if the Daywalker presents herself, when she does, we kill her.’

‘And Merlin,’ added the Morrigan. ‘He will be with her, like the trained dog he is.’

‘Sketchy plan, to say the least,’ observed Balor. ‘And, as I already pointed out, we run the risk of attracting the ire of the Winter Queen.’

‘The Winter Queen is an amoral bitch,’ snapped the Morrigan. ‘We would literally have to decimate her followers before she took action.’

‘It will be a fine line we tread,’ said Balor.

‘Perhaps,’ conceded the Morrigan. ‘We shall have to ensure we tread it with care. Plus, the plan has the added advantage of allowing us to train our troops in readiness for the final battle with the Daywalker and her friends. Now, if you are quite finished with your belly-aching, do you think we could destroy this village?’

The gathered Orcs lit their torches, and the firelight reflected off the snow and highlighted their steaming breath. Like fire breathing dragons.

The village guards, who had thus far been ignorant of the hundreds of Orcs waiting silently outside their walls, immediately sounded the alarm, ringing the bell next to the gate.

The Morrigan raised her sword and then brought it down together with her command.

‘Attack!’

The horde ran forward, storming the village gate. Six of the largest carried a roughly fashioned battering ram. No more than a tree trunk with most of the branches hacked off.

They slammed into the gate, tearing it off its hinges and hammering it back into the village.

Although the gate was well made and sturdy, it was meant to keep wild animals out. And maybe the odd vagrant. But never an army of trained Orcs.

Ululating and screaming and grunting, the Orcs spread through the sleeping village. The inhabitants began to respond. Some running out wielding rusty swords, or pitch forks or hoes. Some with mere sticks.

The massive Orcish warriors cut them down with ease.

The Morrigan strode in after. Balor walked next to her.

His Fomorians, terrible, monstrous ogre-like creatures, formed a wall of protection around the two of them. The Fomorians carried savage, rudely smithed weapons. Ten-foot-long bastard-swords, massive iron clubs with a forest of ten-inch spikes at the head. Shields that were simply huge slabs of iron.

And they projected before them an aura of absolute evil and menace.

Balor watched the slaughter with a slight frown. Particularly when children were being slaughtered.

The Morrigan sneered at him. ‘What? Too bloody for you? Are you

sure you have the strength of character to continue along this path? Or would you rather go back to your current state of near hibernation?'

Balor growled his displeasure at the Morrigan's scorn. 'Watch your mouth, crow woman,' he snapped. 'I am known as Balor the Smiter. Or Balor of the Evil Eye. Not Balor the child killer. There is no glory in this.'

The Morrigan shrugged her indifference. 'No,' she agreed. 'There is not. But that is a mistake made by many. They think war is glorious. Full of trumpets calling, and deeds heroic. That is untrue. Mostly, war is simply fear, and death, and screaming, and crawling in the mud, praying to your god that you be spared. I should know, war is my very existence.

'But later, there will be glory. Trust me, this is a means to an end, not the end itself.'

The Morrigan watched on as one of the Orcs squealed, an arrow seeming to magically sprout from his eye. Another two went down in quick succession. There was obviously an archer of some skill in the village. Most likely the village hunter.

'Find the archer,' shouted the goddess of war. 'And bring him to me.'

Two of the ten Fomorians split from the group and lumbered in the direction the arrows had come from.

The archer rose from behind an upturned wagon and fired at them, his hands moving so fast they were a blur. Arrows thudded into the Fomorian's armor and shields. Finally, one slipped past their defense and struck the one monster in the neck. But the creature didn't even flinch as he ripped the arrow out and continued forward.

The archer was skilled. And he was brave. But once Balor's Fomorians closed to within melee distance, it was all over in seconds.

The one who had been struck with the arrow unleashed a massive overhand strike with his sword. The ungainly blade connected with the archer's head and carried on downwards until it struck the ground, savagely bisecting him.

Neither Fomorian reveled in their one-sided victory. In fact, they didn't even acknowledge it, they simply turned and lumbered back into formation. Job done.

The Morrigan was impressed.

It took almost an hour to reduce the village to a state of post-apocalyptic ruin. What wouldn't burn was smashed down. Bodies and body parts lay scattered randomly about the area. Men, women, children. Even pets and livestock. Orc battle-lust was difficult to stop. Once they got the smell of blood in their nostrils, it was pretty much all go until either they, or the enemy were dead.

However, the Morrigan had managed to keep two villagers alive. An elderly couple.

Now, they cowered in front of her. She had not bothered to have them restrained in any way. They were completely harmless. But she reckoned their age made them perfect witnesses and vehicles to pass on her message. Old enough to garner some respect, but not old enough to be considered mentally incompetent.

'Now, Fred and Ginger,' said the Morrigan. 'Listen to me, and listen very closely.'

'Umm, that's not our names,' said the old man.

'Do I look like I care?' snapped the Morrigan. 'Do you want to live?'

They both nodded frantically, their heads wobbling about on thin necks like balloons on a stick.

'Then do as I say. We are going to leave. When help comes, I want you to pass on this message. *To the Wizard and the Daywalker – look closely. This wanton death and destruction is your fault. Only you can stop it. With love, Morgan le Fay*. Repeat that.'

They both did, talking in perfect unison.

The Morrigan nodded. 'Good. I am pleased. If I hear you relayed that message even slightly incorrectly, I will know, and I shall be back. And then it's no more mister nice guy.'

She turned on her heel and strode away.

Balor, his Fomorians and the massed Orcs followed.

They left the three dead compatriots the archer had killed, lying on the ground. Orcs had no respect for the fallen. They saw them as failures.

Balor said nothing as they marched away. But a small part of him wondered if this new ally of his was perhaps a couple of sandwiches short of a picnic. Her obsession with Merlin and the Daywalker was most definitely on the wrong side of insanity. Not that he cared, it was merely a casual musing.

The horde marched off into the night.

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CHAPTER 44

‘The village of *Scharzesblut*,’ said Merlin.

‘Black Blood?’ translated Emily. ‘Who the hell calls their village that?’

‘It’s not as ominous as it sounds,’ explained the Prof. ‘We are in the Black Forest, and the village is famous for making *bludwurst*, or blood sausage.’

‘And the fact that there’s a massive *Nosferatu* owned castle looming over the village is just a coincidence?’ questioned Troy.

‘Strangely, yes,’ confirmed the Prof.

‘So, I gather the plan is to go inside the dog bothering castle and exterminate the stink-breath blood suckers,’ interjected Belenas.

Merlin sighed. ‘Belenas,’ he answered. ‘We have been over the plan a dozen times. We break up into four separate attack groups. Troy goes in first to do a short recce, we follow when he contacts us via his link to Emily. Each group proceeds to their designated area and they take it from there.’

‘It’s way too ass creepingly complicated,’ said Belenas. ‘My plan is much better. Less to go wrong. We walk up to the front door, smash it down, go in and kill everyone. Simple.’

‘As much as I hate to, I agree with laughing boy,’ said Grannus. ‘Door down, enter, smash everyone’s heads in, home for dinner.’

‘Agreed,’ said Latobias as he opened a portal.

The castle doors were plainly visible through the shimmering circle of light.

‘Piles of poo to the *Nosferatu*,’ bellowed Belenas as he charged through the portal, swinging his huge hammer around his head.

The rest of the gods followed.

‘Damn it,’ cussed Merlin. ‘Idiots. Come on, let’s go.’

Tag ran through first. ‘Wait for me and missus Jones,’ he shouted.

Emily, Muller and Troy followed, then the legionnaires and, finally, Merlin and the Prof.

Belenas swung his hammer into the door, smashing it off its hinges. With a bellow, he ran inside the castle.

‘Pull the drapes down,’ yelled Muller. ‘Any that you see. Let’s get as much sunlight in here as possible.’

A crowd of people came running down a huge sweeping stairway that rose from the middle of the entrance hall. They were armed with a variety of weapons. Shotguns, pistols and even swords.

Sirona blasted them with a jet of steaming water, causing them to crash into each other and fall down the stairs. As they piled up at the bottom, Belenas started playing whack-a-mole with their heads, crushing them with quick swings of his hammer.

Grannus joined in, except he simply stomped on them, breaking bones and crushing flesh with his boots.

Latobias summoned a whirlwind and pushed it down one of the corridors that led into the entrance hall, the whistling wind was accompanied by sounds of furniture breaking and then a chorus of screams.

A door at the rear of the hall slammed open and another bevy of armed familiars rushed out.

Tag hoisted his minigun up. 'Sorry, guys,' he shouted 'Missus Jones's dance card is full.'

The gatling gun squirted out a stream of silver coated lead. Tag wanted to conserve his ammo, so he only gave a brief two second burst. Two hundred rounds tore the familiars apart, coating the floor and the walls in blood and worse.

'Split up, you dog bothering gumdrops,' shouted Belenas. 'We can do more damage that way.'

With that, he sprinted up the stairs, and the rest of the gods followed, splitting up as they reached the first landing.

'This is not the plan,' said Quinton. 'What should we do?'

'Three teams,' answered Emily. 'Let the gods do what they want. Then, Quinton, you come with me. Pick three men to join us. Troy, you take three legionnaires. Tag, Muller, you get the remaining three. I'll go through the middle of the castle, cover the rear and anything we come across on the way. Troy, take the left wing. Muller, you guys take the right.

'We clear the bottom, then proceed to the next floors and tidy up after whatever those nutcases are doing.

'Merlin, I can't speak for you and the Prof. What will you do?'

Merlin raised an eyebrow. 'Oh, I think we shall just remain here for a while. Keep ourselves in reserve.'

'Sounds good,' agreed the Prof as he took out his pipe and filled it. He offered his tabaco pouch to Merlin, and the wizard took it and began to fill his pipe as well.

'Right guys,' said Emily. 'Let's move.'

***

'Where the vamps at?' asked Tag.

Muller shrugged. 'There's more familiars than we're used to,' he said. 'And no food. They're probably in the dungeon with the grinders. Or maybe in one of the towers.'

‘Food? Grinders?’ asked one of the legionnaires.

‘They keep human prisoners to feed on,’ explained Tag. ‘And a Grinder is like a messed-up vampire. One that went wrong during the turning. Still fast and strong and stuff, but a bit wonky. Like a rabid dog. The blood suckers keep loads of them. Vamp attack animals. They usually have to be locked up.’

More armed familiars poured out of a doorway. Missus Jones barked at them. They died.

‘That is one serious machine you got there,’ commented one of the legionnaires.

‘Yeah, we got a good thing going,’ replied Tag.

Far above them, in the upper floors, the team could hear explosions, and the sound of a storm. Thunder, the crackle of lightning. And, right on the edge of hearing, Belenas shouting.

‘Go lick a duck, you blood sucking shitake mushrooms.’

‘Sounds like they found some of the vamps,’ noted Muller.

‘That Belenas is one nutty character,’ commented Tag as he kicked in another door and hosed the room down with hot lead.

***

Troy assumed his wolfman form and took point. The three legionnaires in his fire-team followed him, their automatic shotguns at the ready.

A human familiar sprung out of an alcove and fired. The bullet took Troy in the shoulder, but the handgun round barely penetrated his hide. He dispatched the miscreant with a casual backhanded strike that removed the top of his head, along with most of the contents of his skull.

There was a dull plunk as Troy’s regeneration ejected the pistol slug, dropping it to the stone floor. Seconds later, he was completely healed.

Another door burst open and two more familiars exited, firing wildly as they did. Slugs ricocheted off the stone walls, buzzing spitefully past them. The legionnaires returned fire, their shotguns booming loudly in the confined space.

And that’s when the vampire struck. Dropping down from a beam on the ceiling, he landed on one of the legionnaires and, before anyone could react, tore his throat open.

As the blood sucker leaped to strike the next soldier, Troy moved.

The two supernaturals slammed into each other like a pair of wrecking balls. Claws and teeth and fangs and fists struck hard and fast. Blood arced across the room and the soldiers clutched at their ears as the roars of the wolfman and the shriek of the vampire filled the air.

The two remaining legionnaires were unable to help. There was no way they could draw a bead on the vamp, both he and Troy were moving too fast for the human eye to follow. To the soldiers, the battle seemed like a blur of movement, interspersed with howls and screeches and spurts of blood.

Then, as swiftly as it had begun, it stopped.

Troy stood over the vanquished vampire, holding its severed head in his right hand.

Casting it down he turned to the legionnaires. 'Come on, reload, get ready. We will return for your compatriot's body. Stay vigilant, this is just the beginning.'

***

'Guys, I should be on point,' said Emily.

'No,' responded Quinton.

The rest of the legionnaires nodded.

'What if I ordered you to let me take point?' asked Emily.

'I would have to respectfully ignore you,' answered the Commandant.

Emily looked at the three other legionnaires and saw the same look in their eyes. They were hers to command, unless they thought her order would put her in danger. Then they would politely ignore her.

'We have sworn ourselves to you,' explained Quinton. 'Now, you are our life. Our reason for living. You will not die before us.'

'Look, guys,' said Emily. 'I'm almost unkillable. It just makes sense if…'

'No,' interjected Quinton. 'We serve. We protect. I take point, Jacques, Stefan and Jefferson take flank and rear. You stand in the middle of the hard diamond.'

Emily shook her head, but she smiled at the same time. 'Okay, boys,' she said as she summoned Deathwalker. 'Let's roll.'

Quinton stalked ahead. He carried a Saiga-12 fully automatic 12-gauge shotgun with a detachable 20 round drum magazine. The double aught rounds were silver plated for maximum effect against any vampires

On her right, Jacques sported a Milkor 40mm auto-grenade launcher. Six 40mm grenades loaded with a combination of silver ball bearings and silver-nitrate powder. As an area effect weapon against the *Nosferatu,* it was deadly. Actually, it was pretty effective against any opposition.

On her left, Stefan toted a SAW light machine gun. 200 round belt loaded with silver jacketed 5.56mm Nato rounds.

On her six, Jefferson. He carried two FN P90's. Compact submachine guns that used the new hypervelocity 5.7 x 28mm round.

The boys were loaded for bear. Super strength, Godzilla sized bear.

She hoped they were good enough to survive.

Quinton opened fire, churning out a trio of shots at someone hiding in a doorway. The man went down without a sound.

A clatter of running footsteps echoed down the hallway and a group of familiars came sprinting around the corner, firing as they came.

Emily and her team dropped to the floor and the Legionnaires opened up. The volume of fire was so great it literally tore the advancing familiars to shreds.

There was a brief lull as the men reloaded.

Then Quinton stood up and took point again.

Emily was impressed. They had reacted quickly with little fuss, and they had stopped firing as soon as the opposition was vanquished. All good.

They continued forward, clearing each room as they did.

After twenty minutes, Emily had to admit to herself – she was bored. She was so used to being on the cutting edge of every attack that these legionnaires treating her with kid gloves was actually staring to irritate her.

She wanted to get in on the kill, and although she realized that was not really the correct way to think, she didn't care. Both her and Deathwalker needed to fight.

She was Shadowhunter.

She was Daywalker.

She was Pack.

She was Warrior.

Finally, they reached the end of the interminable corridor. A set of iron bound oak doors barred the way.

Quinton swopped out his magazine for another loaded with solid slugs. Then he lined up the shotgun and burned off six rounds, blowing the lock off and forcing the doors open to reveal three obvious vampires standing in the middle of the dully lit room, fangs glinting as they bared their teeth.

Emily smiled.

Time to have some fun.

But before she could react, the legionnaires opened fire. Sweeping torrents of grenades, shotgun rounds, 5.56mm machine gun rounds and hypervelocity FN slugs.

It was as if a wall of fire was sweeping the room. And the shooting was controlled, almost every round striking their target.

In the first few seconds, over 500 rounds of ammunition and explosives tore into the vampires. Such was the concentration of silver coated lead that all three of the bloodsuckers were decapitated, their heads literally exploding into red mist.

Again, as soon as the team had finished, they reloaded. Then they stepped forward to check the bodies.

'They're dead,' snapped Emily. 'You can tell because you shot their heads off. That's usually a real obvious tell.'

Quinton stared at Emily for a few seconds. 'Have we done something wrong?' he asked, his expression one of concern.

Emily took a deep breath. 'No,' she admitted. He had done his job perfectly; it wasn't his fault that her dark side needed to spill blood. 'Well done, guys. Good job.'

The soldiers grinned. Happy. They had pleased their mistress.

Quinton was about to continue their search when the entire castle shuddered from a huge explosion. The ground shook, dust fell from the ceilings and the sounds of glass shattering and wood splintering echoed through the building.

Emily had no idea what caused the explosion, but she knew, it was huge.

'Head for the entrance,' she yelled. 'We need to talk to Merlin and regroup.'

As one, the team headed back the way they had come.

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CHAPTER 45

The entire left wing of the castle was a smoking ruin.

'What the hell?' yelled Emily.

'These idiots blew the place up,' said Merlin, gesturing at the four gods.

'Had to,' said Belenas. 'Was full of snot licking vampires.'

'Hold on,' said Emily as she ran her eyes over the team. 'Where is Troy?' She turned to the gods. 'If you have hurt Troy, I swear, gods or not, you are all dead.'

A wave of coercion rolled out of her.

But the gods shrugged it off.

'No need for that,' grunted Troy as he emerged from the rubble. He was carrying one of his legionnaires. A second limped beside him. There was no sign of the third.

'Where is Bart?' asked Quinton.

Troy shook his head. 'Sorry.'

'The explosion?'

'No. Vampire,' replied Troy. Then he turned to Merlin. 'What happened? We were lucky to get out alive.'

'Blew the place up,' said Grannus proudly. 'Wasn't easy, I tell you. Not in our current reduced states, but we managed it.'

'How?'

'Sirona filled the whole floor with water. Then I hit it with a beam of superheated light, turned it to steam. Steam expands, boom! Then as it exploded, Latobias combined the explosion with a few lightning bolts and that was all she wrote.

'Belenas did nothing,' continued Grannus. 'Just complained about how depressed he was. Idiot.'

'Up yours, you malarking fart knocker. God of shiny things, pah! Pathetic.'

'What about the prisoners?' asked Merlin.

'What prisoners?' responded Grannus.

'Exactly,' shouted the wizard. 'You didn't even check. If there are human prisoners, and they were in the tower, you just murdered them all.'

Grannus looked shocked.

'I didn't murder anyone,' said Belenas. 'Remember, I just stood and watched.'

Troy held his hand up. 'You can stop worrying,' he said. 'There were

no prisoners in the left wing. I would have smelled them.'

'You can smell the difference between a familiar, a vampire and a prisoner?' scoffed Belenas.

Troy looked at the god and growled. The sound was so menacing that Belenas took an involuntary step backwards.

'I am Omega,' said Troy by way of an explanation.

'Of course he can,' interjected Emily. 'He can smell emotions, sense fear, hear a feather drop from a hundred yards away. His senses are superlative. Differentiating between a vampire's familiar and a terrified human prisoner is comparatively easy.'

'Where are they then?' asked Merlin.

Troy sniffed the air a few times and then pointed. 'There. Underground.'

'Grinders?' asked Tag.

Troy shook his head. 'They were all in the left wing. A series of rooms under the tower. They wouldn't have survived the explosion. Even a Grinder will get squelched under a million tons of rubble.'

'Okay, let's get the prisoners,' said Emily. 'Latobias can fly them to safety. Even if he has to make a few trips. Then we need to go back to the hideout and figure out how, or even if, we can all work together in the future. Because this operation was, to put it bluntly, a steaming pile of crap.'

Emily headed towards the prisoners. Quinton, Jacques, Stefan and Jefferson immediately formed a hard diamond around her.

Troy raised an eyebrow and Emily grinned at him.

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CHAPTER 46

Hadad sat back in his chair and lit his pipe. Soon the air was redolent with the fragrance of sherry and vanilla from the flavored tobacco.

The philosopher was concerned. The Blood King, Belikov, had just concluded his meeting with the heads of the other Russian houses.

When Belikov had insisted Jebe summon them and bring them to the meeting, regardless of what they wanted to do, Hadad had known it would result in bad feelings.

But Hadad had not been prepared for the utter hatred the other heads of houses felt for the Blood King.

Or their depth of disgust about the alliance he was suggesting. Nay, not suggesting, ordering them to be part of.

They did not believe the houses should be under one ruler. Autonomy was a multi-thousand-year-old tradition amongst the houses. To be held under one vampire's rule was an anathema to them. It was quintessentially un-*Nosferatu*.

But even though their rebellion bubbled close to the surface, none openly opposed Belikov. Because fear trumped their other feelings.

Then Belikov addressed them.

And for the first time, Hadad saw the power of the *Triginta*. Even though Belikov possessed but one third of the full artifact, his powers of persuasion, his charisma and his obvious leadership had been enhanced to the point of magic.

It took all of Hadad's tremendous intellectual prowess to resist the hyperbole, the persuasion and the all-enveloping influence Belikov was wielding. The *Triginta* turned his every proposal, his every utterance into words of silver and gold.

He was their Champion, and they were his disciples.

The Messiah of blood.

He had talked of the rise of the *Nosferatu*. How they would assume their rightful place on the planet.

Master of all.

Subservient to none.

They would rule, and the food would quiver in fear at the very thought of them.

Then Belikov had left the room to the sound of cheers and applause.

However, Hadad noticed that very soon after Belikov had left, the sway he held over them started to fade. And by the time the heads of the houses were leaving, their thoughts were once again reverting to

what they had been prior to the Blood King's speech.

This was obviously because Belikov possessed only a part of the full *Triginta*. If he ever managed to collect all thirty pieces, there would be no stopping him.

And that is what worried Hadad. In fact, it terrified him. He knew that the best way for the *Nosferatu* to survive was to remain in the shadows. To control the dark and leave the light to the humans. Feed, but do not attempt to subjugate.

Do not waken the sleeping giant. For in his insane desire for power and glory, Belikov had forgotten, the human's default setting is war.

And they are many of them.

Hadad knew, to war against humanity was to die.

With a frown he took a snuff box from his jacket pocket.

It was a small, shabby wooden box. Nothing ornate about it. A simple steel clasp, and a carved letter H.

He opened it carefully and looked inside.

There, resting in the bottom of the box, its tarnished surface covered in black, ground tobacco, was a single silver Roman Sestertii.

Even if Belikov managed to find the rest of the *Triginta*, he will never have the complete set.

And the ancient vampire smiled, for he knew, this was just the beginning.

FINI

Well – there we have it. Another chapter in Emily's endless battle against the *Nosferatu*. I sincerely hope you enjoyed it.

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Book 7 REVOLUTION

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CHAPTER 1

The Duke of Wellington once said – Nothing except a battle lost can be half so melancholy as a battle won.

This is just a posh British way of saying – war is crappy, even if you win it. But losing one is even crappier.

The windrows of dead villagers had not even had the privilege of fighting a battle. They had simply been exterminated. Smoke rolled across the remains of the burned-out buildings. Corpses lay strewn like so much flotsam and jetsam.

Some lay alone. Others in clusters. Whole families, lovers, friends.

Together in death as they were in life.

A dog gnawed at the single Orcish corpse one of the villagers had managed to kill.

Flocks of hooded crows, rooks and ravens darkened the skies as they came looking for carrion. Foxes and badgers slunk through the deserted streets, stopping every now and then to tear a chunk of flesh from one of the fallen.

Then the sky clouded over and, within seconds, it began to rain. Heavy, sullen drops of water. The heavens were weeping.

A woman stood alone in the center of the village green, surrounded by the end of her life as she knew it.

Her eyes were dry, because she was past lamentation. Past desolation. Past everything but achieving the mere basics of life.

Breath in.

Breath out.

Even the thundering sound of galloping horses approaching did not cause her to move her head.

She simply stood.

Her mind as empty as the nothingness left of her existence.

Everyone she knew was dead.

Finally, she looked up, her attention focusing on the detachment of upper Fae cavalry that had pulled up in front of her.

One of the Fae nudged his steed forward, stopping in front of her.

The commander of the detachment was one, Lord Jingo Partridge. A leader known more for his relative closeness to the Winter Queen than his military prowess.

‘You,’ he called out. ‘Peasant woman. What happened here?’

She looked up at him, her face a mask of absolute subjection. ‘They’re all dead,’ she whispered.

‘I can see that, woman,’ snapped the commander. ‘Who did this?’
The woman blinked owlishly and then spoke, her voice bereft of emotion. ‘There is a message,’ she mumbled. ‘For the Daywalker and the Wizard. Only you can stop this. Love, the Morrigan.’
Lord Partridge stared at her, his face a picture of bafflement. ‘What does that mean?’ he shouted. ‘Explain, peasant.’
Ignoring the lord completely, the woman looked about her, then, slowly, she shambled over to one of the fallen. Bending down, she picked up a small dagger that had fallen next to the corpse.
Without warning, she placed the blade against her neck – and slit her own throat.
‘Bloody hell, woman,’ yelled lord Partridge. ‘What you go and do that for? Idiot, I still had questions.’
As he was raving, one of the other cavalrymen dismounted, walked over to the woman and checked her pulse.
‘Sergeant Pillory,’ snapped Partridge. ‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’
‘Just checking, my lord,’ answered the sergeant.
‘She’s obviously dead,’ said Partridge.
‘Seems that way, my lord,’ agreed the sergeant. ‘I shall organize a team to ensure she gets a decent send off, sir,’ he continued. ‘We will gather all of the villagers and construct a pyre on the east side of the village.’
Lord Partridge waved his hand dismissively. ‘No need,’ he said in a bored tone. ‘I’m sure the crows and the foxes will take care of the carrion. Leave it, we need to report to the Queen.’
Sergeant Pillory pointedly ignored his commander and ordered six of his troops to dismount. ‘Carry the bodies to the east wall,’ he instructed them. Then, turning to the rest of the squad he told them to collect enough wood for a funeral pyre.
Finally, he turned to face lord Partridge once more. ‘The pyre will be set as you instructed, my lord,’ he informed his commander. ‘I am sure the Queen will be very impressed at the compassion you have shown her loyal subjects.’
Lord Partridge stared at the non-commissioned officer for a few seconds before his self-importance and inbred sense of entitlement overwhelmed the obvious lack of obedience being shown him.
‘Yes, sergeant,’ he agreed. ‘Make it so. I shall be outside the wall. Send some of the men to set up an awning, chairs and a table for me.’
Sergeant Pillory bowed deeply.
‘It shall be done, my lord.’
Only when the aristocrat had ridden back through the village gates did the sergeant allow his distaste show. And only for the briefest second.

Then he turned to oversee the sad and gristly task of preparing the villagers for their funeral ceremony, at the same time wondering who the Daywalker and the Wizard might be.

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CHAPTER 2

Merlin's face was pale with fury. His eyes shone with emotion and his breath came in short jagged inhalations. Like a man in pain.
'Calm down, my friend,' said the Prof 'You'll do yourself no end of stress induced damage going off like this.'
'Calm down,' yelled Merlin. 'Easy for you to say, it isn't your name that is being tied to literal genocide.'
'How many?' asked Emily, her face as pale as Merlin's. 'How many have they killed?'
Merlin shrugged. 'Not sure. Hundreds? Not thousands.'
'Not yet,' interjected the Prof
'Well, we have to stop it,' stated Emily.
'It's a trap,' said Troy.
'Obviously,' agreed Emily. 'But that doesn't matter, does it? Innocents are dying. And they are dying because of me. It has to stop.'
'Not because of you,' said Grannus. 'Because of that insane crow woman.'
'She is doing the killing,' admitted Emily. 'But the dying is because of me. I am ultimately responsible.'
'Not true,' interjected the Prof 'I would say that, ultimately, Merlin and I are responsible. After all, we showed mercy, of a sort. We imprisoned her instead of destroying her essence. So, the blame lies with us.'
'Hey,' said Tag, his voice raised almost to a shout. 'Enough. Seriously, enough whining about whose fault it is, or isn't, or might be. Me and missus Jones say, let's go get this bitch.'
'What he says,' added Troy.
Merlin stood still for a while, thinking.
'What are we waiting for?' asked Emily.
'Pause for a while, child,' replied Merlin. 'Obviously something needs to be done about this. However, it will do us no good rushing in without a plan. Or without knowing what the long-term consequences might be.'
'The long-term consequences are that innocent people will keep dying until we show up,' stated Emily.
'Fine,' returned Merlin. 'So, what do you suggest we do? Open a portal to the world of the Fae, rush in where angels fear to tread, and then what?'
'We find the Morrigan and stop her,' replied Emily.

‘How?’
Emily frowned. ‘I don’t know,’ she admitted. ‘But surely it’s better than sitting on our asses while people are dying.’
‘No,’ denied Merlin. ‘It isn’t. Look, I understand, more than you think. I have witnessed countless vile acts such as this. Death beyond imagining. And if there is one thing I have learned, going off half-cocked will only result in failure. Stop. Think. Approach this from a place of calm, not anger.’
Emily took a deep breath and nodded. ‘You’re right,’ she said.
‘How about I make some tea?’ asked Tag. ‘We can discuss it all over a nice cuppa.’
‘No tea for me,’ snapped Grannus. ‘Booze is what I need. Whoever heard of the god of shiny things drinking tea?’
‘In all fairness, shiny thing guy,’ returned Tag. ‘No one. But that’s only because no one has heard of you, period.’
‘Are you taking my name in vain?’ bellowed Grannus.
‘No,’ replied Tag. ‘All I is saying, the god of shiny things don’t sound so cool. Maybe, back in the day when peeps wore animal skins and stuff, shiny things was cool. Now, not so much.’
Grannus was about to reply when, instead, he hesitated, thinking. ‘You mean, I need to change with the times?’
‘Exactly,’ agreed Tag. ‘For a start, god of shiny things sounds lame. What you need to be is – the god of Bling.’
‘Bling?’
‘Yeah.’
‘What the hell is, Bling?’
‘Hold on,’ said Tag. ‘Before I make the tea. Look at this.’
The big man took out his cell and did a quick search on the internet. Then he held the screen up so Grannus could see.
‘Who is that,’ asked the god.
‘That be Mister T,’ replied Tag. ‘See all those gold chains and shiny jewels? That be Bling.’
‘The god of Bling,’ mused Grannus. ‘I like it. Yes. From this day forth, I, Grannus, shall be known as the god of Bling.’
‘Right on, man,’ cheered Tag.
‘But still, no tea,’ added Grannus. ‘Booze.’
‘Sure,’ agreed Tag. But trust me, you don’t know what you is missing.’

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CHAPTER 3

The portal crackled open with a flash of lightning and the smell of ozone. Slowly, it widened until it was both wide enough and tall enough to fit two people side by side.

Latobias strode through, followed closely by Sirona, and Belenas.

The team were working on the theory – if you are going to enter a potentially hostile environment, send the gods in first. Grannus had stayed behind to follow up on the *Triginta*.

'Well, we're in the pox-ridden, donkey farting right place,' noted Belenas as he turned back to face the portal. 'All clear, you piles of monkey midden,' he yelled.

Merlin and the Prof came next. Then Troy, Muller and Tag.

Finally, the Legionnaires, crowding in closely around Emily. Forming a human shield against any harm that may threaten her.

As the last one came through, the portal flickered closed.

Quinton gestured to his men and they fanned out to form a perimeter, weapons ready. Tag hauled missus Jones from his shoulder and scanned the immediate area for unfriendlies.

Emily noted a huge wall in the distance. 'What's that?'

'The capital of the winter realm,' answered Merlin. 'The seat of the Winter Queen. That's where we're heading.'

'Why we come out so far away?' asked Tag. 'Couldn't we have popped out in front of the gates? I don't like walking much, seems unnecessary.'

'It's very necessary if you want to stay alive,' answered the Prof 'Any portals opening within five miles of the walls get zapped. There are powerful runes spread around the capital and they are charged on a daily basis by top Fae mages.

'It's for security. Stop armies opening up portals and attacking. This way, you can only materialize a few miles away and then they see you coming, raise the alarm and ready their defenses. But at the same time, it is still close enough to allow important guests, trade missions and such, relatively easy access.'

'Makes sense,' admitted Tag. 'Well, let's get to walking then.'

The team began their five-mile trudge through the knee-high snow.

Both Tag and Troy grumbled as they walked, picking their knees up high to facilitate movement.

'Bloody snow,' mumbled Tag. 'Sick of snow. Next time we go vampire killing, or Fae saving, I vote we do it in Jamaica. Sun, rum and jerked

chicken.'
'I'm with you, big man,' agreed Troy. 'I've seen about enough snow to last a lifetime.'
'I think it's beautiful,' disagreed Emily. 'The way the sun sparkles off the ice in the trees. The pristine whiteness of the landscape, like it's just been spring cleaned. It's amazing.'
No one answered, concentrating instead on putting one foot in front of the other. Their progress was slow. Slower than normal due to the fact they were all carrying vast amounts of ammunition and ordnance.
Each legionnaire carried his primary weapon and anything from a thousand rounds to five thousand rounds of ammunition for the same. Over fifty pounds of dead weight.
Three of the Legionnaires were carrying the respective parts of a 60mm mortar as well as their primary weapon and ammo. Every soldier carried five rounds for the mortar, adding a further twelve pounds to their loads. Finally, they each carried ten M14 'toe-popper' anti-personal land mines. They weighed in at a mere three and a half ounces each and were made to maim, not kill. Perfect miniature force multipliers.
Apart from that, they carried little else. Water, a small medic kit each and a few French RCRI rations packs. The NATO version of MRE's. The difference being, instead of foil packs of mushy pasta and vegetables, or pork and rice, they contained meals like chicken rillettes, farmhouse pate, duck tabbouleh, and brie cheese. Napoleon once said, an army marches on its stomach, and the French military took that very seriously.
Tag had gone large with his ammo, as he knew the prodigious rate missus Jones chewed through it. Fortunately, due to his inordinate strength he was able to hump a combined weight approaching five hundred pounds. That included ten thousand rounds of ammunition.
In short, the hunters had enough firepower to fight a war. Which was exactly what they were intending to do.
It took the team two hours to get to the walls, and as they got closer Emily marveled at the sight.
They loomed over them, vast and intimidating. The walls were over a hundred feet high. Every sixty feet or so, a stone tower reared upwards, on the top of each, either an arrow throwing ballista or a mangonel catapult. Hundreds of archers lined the battlements and more guards were massed in front of the main gates. Cavalry patrolled the surrounds and one of the detachments approached them as they neared the walls.
'Are these guys fighting a war?' asked Muller. 'They definitely seem to be on a war footing.'
The Prof shook his head. 'No. Both Fae courts are big on showing

strength. This level of preparedness is normal. However, much of it is show. They haven't fought an actual war for a very long time.'
'Okay,' interjected Merlin. 'Here comes the cavalry, let me do the talking. Tag, did you hear me? This will call for subtlety and diplomacy.'
The big man nodded. 'Sure thing, boss man. I get it, subtlety and diplomacy are not my strong suit.'
'Shouldn't one of the gods do the introductions?' asked Emily. 'Surely that would impress the hell out of them?'
'No,' replied Merlin. 'The Fae follow strict protocol when it comes to deities. Unless there is a priest present, custom dictates they do not even acknowledge the god. Most likely though, they won't even realize that Latobias, Sirona and Belenas are gods. So, pipe down about that.'
The cavalry detachment pulled up in front of the team of hunters. Thirty strong, they formed a line barring their way. One of the men nudged his mount forward. His fancy uniform and the plumes in his headgear picked him out as the ranking officer. As did his expression of vague disdain.
'State your business,' he commanded.
'We are here to see her majesty,' answered Merlin.
The upper Fae nobleman sneered at the wizard. 'No chance,' he scoffed. 'Now, I might allow you to enter the city, if the requisite payments are made. And I say, might. But first, a few questions. What are those strange devices your servants are carrying?'
'Servants,' spluttered Tag.
'Tag,' snapped Merlin. 'What did I say?'
'Subtlety and diplomacy.'
'Good man,' the wizard turned to the cavalry officer. 'These are not my servants,' he informed him. 'And I am not under your command. So, sir knight, I suggest you get your men out of our way and allow me to enter the city in order for me to visit the Queen. I am on an important mission and have little time for self-important, low level horseback riders such as yourself. Now, begone.'
The Fae cavalry leader stared open mouthed at Merlin and then, with deliberate slowness, he drew his saber. The blade rasped out of the scabbard with a chilling sound of metal against hardened leather.
But before it was fully drawn, Merlin mumbled an incantation, and with a gesture, lifted the Fae lordling from his saddle and threw him some fifty yards away. He landed with a dull thump in a drift of snow. It was deep enough to save his life, but not deep enough to prevent a few broken bones and an inevitable loss of consciousness.
'Hey, maybe I can do this subtlety and diplomacy thing after all,' noted Tag. 'Instead of magic though, I'd just use a fist.'

‘Not sure how diplomatic that was,’ ventured Troy.
‘Or subtle,’ offered the Prof
‘Shut up,’ growled Merlin as the rest of the cavalry troop drew their weapons and started to advance on the team of hunters.
‘Enough,’ roared Latobias, stepping forward, flanked by Sirona and Belenas. ‘I begin to find your attitudes irksome.’
He wove a pattern in the air and, with a heave of his shoulders, launched forth a howling blizzard.
Sirona conjured up a spray of water droplets that turned instantly to sharp shards of ice in the sub-zero temperature.
And Belenas rose his massive hammer high and struck the frozen ground with such force it felt like an earthquake.
Within seconds, the horses had bolted or just fallen down and the cavalry riders were scattered about on the snow, some unconscious, others nursing broken limbs, ragged ice-cuts and full-body bruises.
Fortunately, the company sergeant was still *compos mentis*. Because it is well known that, while the lords and commissioned officers hold the rank, the actual leading is done by the non-comms.
As is oft quoted, sergeants run the army. The officers are simply there to give things a bit of tone and prevent warfare becoming a mere lower-class brawl.
So, while the ranking officer lay broken and unconscious in a deep snow drift, the sergeant snapped to attention and threw the gods a perfect salute, despite the fact his right arm appeared to be broken.
‘Begging your pardon, misters,’ he bawled at paraded ground volume. ‘We appear to have made an error. On behalf of the Winter Queen and my men, we apologize and beg we be allowed to escort you to the palace as you requested.’
‘Good man,’ replied Merlin. ‘What about your officer?’
‘I’m sure he will be fine, sir,’ replied the sergeant. ‘After all, his head is so far up his own ass I am confident he will not freeze to death. Now, if you would follow us. Well, us that can still walk, I shall present you to her majesty.’
And so, the hunters entered the city of the Winter Queen, following a limping, horseless, broken and humiliated detachment of her majesty’s cavalry.

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CHAPTER 4

‘Tell me, sergeant,’ said the Queen. ‘Where is lord Ponderberry now?’
‘Unconscious at the bottom of a snowdrift, your imperial majesty, beckoner of storms, mistress of snow and guiding light of the Winter.’
‘If he survives, when you see him next, tell him - by order of her Majesty, he is now a common foot soldier. His rank, his titles, his lands and his wealth are now yours. Kneel.’
The sergeant dropped to his knees.
There was a murmur of surprise amongst the gathered courtiers, but they made sure their voices were not raised loud enough for any possible dissention to be audible.
The Winter Queen conjured forth a sword of ice. Leaning forward in her throne, she touched the sergeant on each shoulder. ‘What is your name.?’
‘Reekus Mallington, your imperial majesty, beckoner of st…’
‘Yes, yes. Enough,’ interjected the Queen. ‘I dub thee, lord Mallington. Now go.’
The sergeant – nay, the lord – stood, bowed and stepped back. He left the throne room, taking three steps, bowing, another three. Rinse and repeat until he was out of sight.
‘Nice one, dude,’ commented Tag as he watched the newly minted aristocrat retire. ‘Cool to see a brother go up in the world.’
The Winter Queen glared at the team of hunters. But Emily noted that her imperial stare was marred slightly by a barely notable tic. The corner of her right eye betrayed the emotion she was hiding behind her mask of regality.
Particularly when her gaze rested on Merlin.
It was impossible to hide emotion from Emily. She could hear the Queen’s heartbeat. She could smell her subtle changes in body temperature. She could see the tiniest of visual clues.
And she was only slightly shocked when she deduced that the emotion the Winter Queen of the Fae was hiding, was fear.
This imperial monarch of all around her was afraid of the wizard. But she was strong enough to conceal the fact from her subjects.
‘What are you doing here, Myrddin Wyllt? Your presence always brings upheaval.’
‘You well know what I am doing here, majesty,’ replied Merlin. ‘For even you are not so detached from your subjects as to have no knowledge of the current mass genocide that is currently taking place

in your realm.'
'A few villages do not amount to genocide,' returned the Queen.
'Your concern for your subjects overwhelms me,' replied Merlin. 'So, you are aware of it. I take it you have also heard the messages left with the scant survivors of the atrocities?'
The Queen did not answer.
'The Wizard and the Shadowhunter?' prompted Merlin.
Still, the Fae Queen remined silent.
'Listen Feliticia,' said Merlin, ignoring the horrified gabble that arose from the courtiers at his use of the Queens given name. 'Could we dispense with the whole game of thrones, subterfuge thing? Really, the machinations of the court make my teeth itch. We are here to put a stop to the needless killing currently being committed by the Morrigan and her allies.
'We all know she is only doing it to bring us to her, and so, here we are. This visit is a courtesy, not an obligation. We do not seek your permission; however, we do seek your blessing.'
'You do realize, I could have you all clapped in chains for merely thinking my given name, let alone addressing me by it,' stated the Queen.
'No, majesty,' corrected Merlin with a sigh. 'You could try to have us clapped in chains.'
The Queen cast a look at her detachment of guards, as if to contemplate ordering them to do as she had threatened.
At the same time, the sound of weapons being cocked, clattered through the room. As did the low hum of Missus Jones's barrels spinning in preparation to open fire.
A wave of power rippled from the trio of gods as they too prepared for a possible confrontation.
Surprisingly, the Queen did give an order, but it was not what anyone expected.
'Leave the room,' she commanded her subjects. 'All of you, even the guards. I want to be alone with these people.'
The captain of the guard stood forward. 'But, majesty…' he began.
However, the Queen stopped his voicing with a mere look.
He snapped to attention and led his men from the throne room, ensuring all of the courtiers left as well.
The door swung shut behind them, closing with a hollow boom.
The Queen's expression changed, softening slightly, allowing her true self to show through.
'Your visits always bring pain,' she addressed Merlin in a soft voice.
Merlin shrugged. 'I come when needed. It is not my fault that usually I am only needed during times of disorder and upheaval. I did not bring the pain, but I come to stop it.'

‘Why is the Morrigan doing this?’ asked the Queen.
‘It is a personal vendetta,’ replied Merlin. ‘Against Emily and myself.’
‘Emily?’
‘The Shadowhunter,’ stated Merlin.
Emily stepped forward and bowed slightly. ‘Majesty,’ she introduced herself.
The Queen blanched. ‘Such power,’ she whispered. Then she cast her gaze over the rest of the team. ‘This is too much, Merlin,’ she said. ‘Even for you. You bring gods and supernaturals into my domain without so much as a warning. Are these who I think they are?’
‘Depends who you think they are, I suppose,’ answered Merlin.
‘Latobias. Sirona. Belenas.’
The gods nodded their acknowledgment of the Fae Queen.
‘Technically, I should not be addressing you personally,’ continued the Queen. ‘It should be done through the auspices of a priest. I hope I am not offending.’
‘Ha,’ scoffed Belenas. ‘We didn’t make that stupid dung-heap of a rule. That was made by the church. Yet another way for them to gain more power. Deny access to the gods. Keep it all for themselves. Charge people to do what is actually their right. Thinking about it, maybe a bit of good old-fashioned smiting would sort things out. At least it might stop some of the poxy corruption. Whatever, girl, you address us all you want.’
The Queen inclined her head. ‘Thank you.’ Then she turned to the rest of the team, singling each one out as she spoke.
‘Professor.’
The Prof bowed.
‘Omega.’
Troy held his closed fist to his chest in salutation.
‘The Pious.’
Muller bowed.
‘The Immortal.’
Tag chuckled. ‘That’s what they say, Queeny. How you doing?’
The Queen frowned, not sure how to take the big man’s familiar style of greeting. She decided to ignore him and continue her perusal of the team.
‘These humans,’ she said to Merlin. ‘I have not heard of them.’
‘Legionnaires,’ said Merlin.
The Queen nodded. ‘Ah, yes. Romans. Who is their Centurion?’
Quinton stepped forward and saluted. ‘That would be me, majesty. And not Roman. *Légion étrangère.* We protect the Shadowhunter.’
The Queen raised an eyebrow. ‘I doubt very much the Daywalker needs much protecting.’
‘Be that as it may, majesty, we have given our life to her.’

‘Very well. Now, tell me, wizard, how do you propose to stop the Crow from murdering my people?’
‘If I may, majesty,’ interjected Emily. ‘Why haven’t you already sent out troops to stop her?’
‘It is a fair question,’ replied the Queen. ‘Many reasons. Firstly, the slaughter has not reached endemic proportions. You must bear in mind; my realm is huge and I have many millions of subjects. The deaths of a few thousand mean little in the overall scheme of things.
‘Not only that,’ continued the monarch. ‘The Morrigan has used the Right of Conquest to take control of several Orcish tribes. As of this moment she has approximately six hundred Orc warriors under her flag.’
‘Surely that means little next to the size of your army?’ insisted Emily.
‘True,’ conceded the Queen. ‘However, I must be very careful lest things escalate. The Orcs, the goblins, even the Dwarves hover constantly on the edge of rebellion. If I use too heavy a hand, the lesser tribes may well use it as an excuse to revolt.’
‘I see,’ acknowledged Emily. ‘But if we intercede that should be acceptable.’
‘As long as I am not seen to be too involved,’ added the Queen. ‘I will however insist you take one of my representatives with you. He will be your guide as well as advisor as to our rules and customs.’
‘I know your customs better than you do,’ interjected Merlin.
‘Be that as it may,’ snapped the Queen. ‘I insist.’
‘Fine,’ conceded the wizard. ‘We shall leave tomorrow and head towards the last known incident. I assume we will be offered accommodation in the palace.’
‘You assume much, wizard.’
‘Yes or no, Feliticia,’ returned Merlin.
‘Yes. Of course,’ sighed the Queen as she pulled a silken rope next to her throne. A quiet tinkle of a bell sounded outside the room. Instantly, the door opened and the courtiers paraded back in.
‘You, lord Melberry,’ commanded the Queen. ‘Show these gentlemen to the eastern guest wing. See to it they want for nothing.’
The Lord bowed. ‘As you command, your imperial majesty, beckoner of storms, mistress of snow and guiding light of the Winter.’
‘One thing, your queenliness,’ interjected Tag. ‘Have you guys got French stew and long bread.’
The Fae Winter Queen stared at the big man; her train of thought totally derailed by one of Tag’s classic non sequiturs.
‘I … what … we…’ she stammered.
‘Never mind,’ said Merlin as he grabbed Tag by the arm. ‘Let’s move.’
The hunters traipsed from the room, following lord Melberry’s lead.

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CHAPTER 5

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.
ISIS.
Contrary to what the world's politicians tell us, ISIS is not yet dead. It is merely recovering. Or so the members of the extremist group would have us believe.
One thing, however, is true. They still have many members, and they do have a leader.
Abu Musab al-Hashimi.
And like many militant extremist groups that preach poverty, piety and violence, the leader stuck to only two of the three major doctrines.
He was neither poverty stricken, nor pious.
He was, however, psychotically violent.
So, I guess – two outta three ain't bad.
Al-Hashimi currently lived in what was technically a tent. But to call it a tent would be stretching the true meaning of the word to its very limit. The canvas and wood abode covered some ten thousand square feet. Almost seven times the size of an average American's home.
And that was just al-Hashimi's private quarters.
He was surrounded by hundreds more tents, as well as some mud and stone buildings that housed the groups arms and ammunition.
This tented city was situated in the mountainous region in the north-east of Iraq, close to the borders of both Turkey and Iran.
Al-Hashimi had named the city, *Bayt Altaeleum*. The Place of Learning.
And, to be fair, its residents did learn things. Mainly, they learned that al-Hashimi was a dick.
But, apart from being a dick, al-Hashim was also a fanatical collector of Asian historical artifacts. Ancient masks, statues, tablets and weapons.
Cases and cases of ancient bric-a-brac. A garage sale of priceless antiques.
And, in amongst the myriad of collectables – five silver coins. Roman sestertii, circa AD 27 to 36.
And that was precisely what Grannus, the new god of Bling, had come for.
A portal crackled open some six hundred yards from the tent city of *Bayt Altaeleum*.
Grannus stepped out.

But this was not the filthy, stench ridden pile of rags that we knew from before. No. In keeping with his new name, this was … well, there was no other way to explain it.
Mister T.
Gone was the massive beard and shoulder length raggedy hair. In its place, a neatly styled Mohawk and a trimmed beard.
A cut-off leather waistcoat displayed Grannus's humungous arms, and the lack of buttons for same ensured that his huge chest played center stage.
But the most noticeable thing about the god of Bling was – well, the Bling.
Perhaps a hundred pounds of gold chain around his neck. Every finger sported at least one ring, complete with large brilliant cut diamonds, rubies and emeralds.
Large, hooped gold earrings dangled from his ears.
Bracelets woven from gold and platinum and covered in diamonds wrapped his wrists and forearms, and his boots were imbedded with precious gems.
He even had diamonds on the soles of his shoes.
He looked down at the sprawling mass of tents and people and military vehicles and horses and camels and he knew – he was too late.
Someone had gotten there before him.
The entire settlement was in an uproar. People shouting in Arabic. Soldiers and civilians running to-and-fro like headless chickens. The odd shot fired into the air, because … just because, he supposed.
But the main reason Grannus knew he was too late – he could not feel the presence of the coins. The otherworldly power they exuded.
He cussed under his breath. There was nothing else to it. He had to enter the stupid tent city and find out who had taken the pieces of the *Triginta*.
He strode down the hill towards the settlement, grumbling as he did. He did have to admit one fact to himself though, Tag's suggestion that he become the god of Bling had already begun to pay dividends. It seemed that the modern human race did indeed worship Bling.
There were entire communities dedicated to it. Online communities, he believed they were called. Families who did little else but tell everyone about it. He had heard their subjects referred to as Kardashianistas or something similar.
Strictly speaking, they weren't worshipping him directly, but the overflow from the mass worship of the material goods themselves was feeding him something he hadn't felt in years.
Adulation.
Blind, unthinking adoration.

And the more he felt it, the more powerful he became.
Obviously, he was far from the towering colossus of the past. But he was much stronger than he had been mere days before.
As he approached, a group of four men ran up to him. They all wielded AK 47 rifles. The man in the lead screamed at Grannus in Farsi. Challenging his right to be there.
Not that the god knew what language the man was talking. Grannus understood anyone speaking in any language that has ever existed. Including Esperanto and Klingon. But he did not perceive them as different languages. He understood them on a quantum level. Likewise, when he spoke, the target heard him speaking in his own language.
'Out of my way, moron,' he grunted.
The man pointed his weapon at the god.
Mistake.
Grannus seized the rifle by the barrel, twisted it into a right angle and tore it from his grasp. Then he grabbed the man's arm, swung him above his head and proceeded to beat the other ISIS members to a bloody pulp, using the first man as a human bludgeon.
Reorienting himself, he continued to stride towards the largest tent. A structure that was more big-top than Bedouin dwelling. A truly massive erection, as it were.
The chaos continued around him as the inhabitants of the makeshift city continued to run about, ensuring that if anyone looked at them, they couldn't be accused of not being busy doing whatever it was they all seemed to be doing. It was the terrorist equivalent of walking around the office, holding a clipboard and looking diligent.
However, as Grannus neared the head honcho's tent, al-Hashimi's personal guards entered the picture. Ten hard men, their eyes windows to their war-torn personalities. Scars on their faces, their bodies and their souls.
These were warriors that had fought Americans, British and Russians at various different times. They considered themselves men of men, and their fathers were men before them.
One of them stepped forward and pointed his AK47 at the god.
'Halt, infidel.'
'Infidel,' bellowed Grannus. 'How dare you call me an unbeliever? It is literally impossible for me not to believe in myself. I am as opposite to an Infidel as one could be. I am actually, Fidel. For I am a god, you asswipe.'
'*Alkafir*,' screamed the guard, his anger running so high he was frothing at the mouth. 'Blasphemer. Prepare to die.'
The rest of the guards brought their rifles to bear.
'Oh, not this again,' sighed Grannus. Eschewing his human-bludgeon

mode of attack, this time Grannus simply created a superheated beam of light and swept it across the group standing in front of him.
The beam turned the ten guards into twenty sperate pieces of ex-guards, bifurcating them at around hip level. The beam petered out as soon as it had done its slicing and dicing job, resulting in a few small fires, and leading a camel to ponder why his fur was smoking. Grannus was stronger than before, but he still needed to conserve energy as much as possible.
And it would do no good to just level the place as he still had questions to ask.
Facing no more opposition, he walked through the opening that led to the inside of the massive tent. The opulence that greeted him was staggering. Hand woven carpets were strewn across the floor. Priceless statues and artifacts were gathered in clusters wherever you looked. Oddly, there were also goats and chickens roaming freely about the dwelling, crapping on everything.
The inside of the tent was separated into countless rooms by more hanging silk carpets draped over wooden bars. The place stank of incense, hashish and animal feces.
Grannus's keen nose could also pick up the smell of good quality scotch whiskey. It was obvious that al-Hashimi's insistence on the upholding of strict sharia law was not something that stretched to cover his lifestyle. He was more sex and drugs and weird discordant Arabian music.
Grannus took a turn and pushed aside a silk carpet to enter another room in the maze that made up the interior of the tent. And he ran straight into a room full of men playing mancala, a board game involving holes and stones. Wads of cash littered the carpet they sat on, and it was clear much high stakes betting was taking place.
The group of a dozen men all turned as one and stared at the short, incredibly wide god with his surfeit of Bling. Grannus wasted no time and took advantage of their momentary surprise to launch his attack.
Picking up one of the myriad of stone statues, this one approximately six feet high and weighing in at nine hundred pounds, he proceeded to use it like a sledgehammer.
Whack-a-mole, the ISIS edition.
One minute later, the mancala players had been reduced to squishy piles of meat, deconstructed AK47's and checkered scarves.
Grannus barged through to the next room.
He could hear shouts and running feet. People had obviously been attracted by the strident pleas for mercy followed by the screams of the dying.
Three heavily armed men ran into the room to be confronted with a blood covered, Bling heavy, wild eyed being, with arms and legs like

tree trunks.
'It is a djinn,' yelped one of the men.
'Djinn?' bellowed Grannus. 'You compare me to a low-level genie in a lamp? How dare you. I am the god of Bling.'
The djinn-accuser cocked his rifle and jerked the trigger. The slug hit Grannus in the center of his chest, deformed against his steel hard muscles and dropped to the ground.
Grannus bent down, picked up the flattened piece of lead and, using his thumb and forefinger, flicked it back at the man, striking him in the center of his forehead. The lead was travelling at such velocity it punched through his skull and erupted out of the back of his cranium, showering the other two men with bone chips and brain.
The survivors immediately decided that discretion was most definitely the better part of valor and, dropping their rifles, they turned and ran, ululating in terror as they did.
Grannus let them go. He wasn't on any sort of seek-and-destroy mission. In fact, he had no idea who ISIS were or what they stood for. Even if he had, he most likely wouldn't have given a fig. His wheelhouse was shiny things – well Bling now – and international terrorism did not cross his radar.
However, he was a god, and one thing gods do not stand for is disrespect. In fact, Grannus had noticed that his new congregation of Bling worshippers also demanded respect. The tiny bit of research he had done had shown him that many Bling wearers and worshippers were constantly accusing people of disrespecting them, or "dissing" them, as it was in the common vernacular.
Well, Grannus did not take kindly to that. In fact, his new motto for the day was – you diss, you die.
Finally, he heard a babble of female voices, combined with high pitched male laughter. The sound of a drunken hyena on helium.
Sounds just like the sort of douche bag who would run an establishment like this, thought Grannus.
He tore his way through a couple of interleading silk carpet walls to find himself in what could only be described as a harem. Sitting on a large, overstuffed sofa was a man with greasy hair, two missing front teeth, wearing a filthy robe and sporting an odor that could stun a donkey at a hundred yards.
'I am assuming you are the leader of this unconscionable pile of crap,' bellowed Grannus. 'So, tell me, who took the *Triginta*, when and how?'
Al-Hashimi stopped giggling and stared open mouthed at the Bling covered man who had dared enter his presence and address him directly without permission.
'Guards,' he yelled.
Grannus chuckled. 'Guards are a bit thin on the ground at the

moment,' he informed the terrorist leader. 'On account of been squished flat or dismembered. Oh, a couple ran away, but I reckon they're still running, so no help there.'

'Guards,' screamed al-Hashimi again, raising his volume this time to the point that he lost his breath and went bright puce from the effort.

'What, you stupid or something?' asked Grannus. 'I just explained about the guard situation. Now, shut it and answer my questions. And smartly, or I am going to get seriously old-testament on you. And believe me, I know what I'm talking about when I make that threat.'

As it happened, not all of the guards were squished or dismembered, there were still al-Hashimi's elite corp. A team of six hyper-fanatical members of his inner circle who were always close in case someone, or something, threatened their leader.

Upon hearing their esteemed leader's cries for help, they bolted in, loaded for bear. Each of them carried the new AK12 assault rifle. And in keeping with their honored position as al-Hashimi's most personal of bodyguards, their weapons were gold plated.

Grannus was impressed. 'Bling guns,' he said as they ran in. 'Now that's what I'm talking about.'

The god's approbation, however, did not stop the elites from opening fire.

Unfortunately, their rank as elite guards had less to do with their training and abilities, and more to do with their capacity to brown-nose al-Hashimi to such an extent it was often impossible to see where his ass ended and their noses began.

Hot lead spewed forth as the AK's were unleashed on full auto. Two of the concubines went down in a welter of blood, scores of holes appeared in the roof of the tent and loud shouts of surprise and pain issued from the exterior as wayward rounds punched through the fabric and struck innocent tent city dwellers.

Unfortunately for the guards, not one round struck Grannus. Not that it would have done more than irritate him.

As their firing pins clicked on empty chambers, the god of Bling smiled. 'My turn.'

The thing with an AK is that it is an extremely tough weapon. Bury it in dirt for months, dig it up and fire it. Carry it through rain and sun and snow, it continues working.

And, as the so-called elite guards were now discovering, it also made an extremely useful hammer.

Grannus had snatched two from the guards and, holding them by their barrels, he was wielding them like Babe Ruth on a real good day.

Bones shattered, craniums split, blood flowed, and seconds later the elite guards were the broken and very dead guards.

They had dissed the god of Bling, and he had explained why that was

a terminally bad idea.
The bevy of beauties that had been swarming around al-Hashimi fled as soon as they could, leaving the terrorist leader alone and terrified and covered in extraneous bits of gore and brain matter.
Grannus grabbed him by his shirt and threw him to the ground. '*Triginta*. Where?'
Al-Hashimi began gibbering in terror as the enormity of the pile of crap he was in became apparent. 'I know of no such thing,' he whined.
'Silver coins. Roman. Talk or die.'
'Many treasures were stolen this morning by a group of three infidels,' stammered al-Hashimi. 'They arrived in a blaze of unholy fire and they killed my people indiscriminately. Then they went to my treasure house and ransacked it.'
'What did they take?'
'Many, many things.'
'Are you sure? And think carefully, because I will check, and if you have lied to me, I shall kill you in a drawn out and interesting way.'
The ISIS leader blanched. 'Perhaps not that many treasures,' he ventured.
'What?'
'Honestly? I don't know. They searched the treasury and then left. Whatever it is that they took, it was small enough to conceal. Or, they took nothing.'
'They took the *Triginta*,' said Grannus. 'I felt its power leave. Now, who were they?'
Al-Hashimi shook his head. 'As I said, three infidels riding Satan's fire. I have answered your questions, master Djinn,' said al-Hashimi. 'You said you would let me live if I did so.'
'I said no such thing,' denied Grannus. 'I said if you lied, I would kill you in interesting ways. Never said I wouldn't kill you.'
'Please, I beg for mercy.'
Grannus frowned. Then he raised his hand and unleashed a shaft of mega-heated air. It punched through al-Hashimi's chest like a light saber.
'I'm not a djinn.' He said as he stood up and walked from the room.
As he exited, he was greeted by a tribe of weapon wielding warriors. With a shake of his head, and a sigh of exasperation, Grannus cut loose. Shafts of laser-light were flung around like a light show at a rave. Tents burst into flame, people were bifurcated and diced, and them, finally, one of the beams hit the main armory.
The resulting explosion ripped through the camp like the end of days.
Grannus nodded in appreciation, opened a portal, and left.
Later, the British, American and Russian military would all claim they were the ones who had struck the city, putting a final end to that

particular branch of ISIS.

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Arend sipped at his cup of herbal tea and wondered whether to praise or pillory his two assistants.

On the plus side, they had both performed commendably when attacking the Arab camp. They had proved to be calm, ruthless and remarkably efficient.

On the down side, though, both of them had degenerated badly vis-à-vis their nerd-speak. The excitement at being let loose to destroy people and property at will had resulted in an inordinate amount of 'thundersticks' and 'horseless-carriages' and even 'magical-boom-ball' when observing a hand grenade exploding.

It was unconscionable. They were adult *Hulder*, not kindergarten goblins.

But then, they had gotten another five coins towards the full Triginta set. He had already given them to a trusted courier to deliver them to Hadad.

With a sigh, Arend stood up. 'Hey, you two,' he said. 'Come over here. Stick your fingers out,' he continued, as he drew his sword.

'Aah, boss, seriously,' griped Remer.

'Yes,' replied Arend. 'Seriously.'

The sword fell. A finger plopped to the floor.

'Mist.'

She gave him the finger.

And lost it.

'Now that bit of unpleasantness is out of the way,' said Arend. 'Congratulations are probably in order. Well done.'

'Gee, thanks boss,' they bleated together, pleased as punch.

Because fingers came and went, but compliments lasted forever.

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CHAPTER 6

‘The Orcs have razed another village, my king,’ announced the goblin captain. ‘We have just received word by runner.’

The king grunted his acknowledgment of the news. Shifting his grossly obese body to one side, he farted loudly. A stentorian explosion of air.

‘Where?’ he demanded, spewing half masticated goat meat from his mouth as he spoke. The grease from the roasted leg dribbled down his chin and stained his already filthy tunic.

‘To the north, my king. The Fae village of Strander.’

‘Captain, call general Qeztal, warlock Maxtim and the witches three. I need to caucus.’

The captain bowed, turned and ran to obey.

While the king waited, he continued snuffling at various pieces of roasted meat, dribbling like a puppy as he forced it into his mouth as quickly as possible.

Soon he heard the approach of various goblins, their wide, bare feet slapping the ground as they ran to him, obeying his summons. They crowded into the longhouse, pushing and shoving each other as they all tried to show they were the keenest.

The most powerful subjects in goblin society, acting like low-level debutants at a summer ball.

Even the witches three, a trio of hideous crones of magical bent, known and feared throughout the Fae lands, showed the hob-goblin king some serious respect.

Because, although king Globolb was morbidly obese and disgustingly filthy, he was also a remarkably astute leader. As well as this, he was psychotically vicious to the extent that, even amongst a nation known for its tendency to solve all problems with violence, he was considered to be more than a little over the top.

They lined up in front of Globolb, waiting for him to address them.

Finally, after sucking the marrow from a particularly juicy bone, the king spoke.

‘General, why are the Orcs attacking Fae villages?’

‘I have no idea, my king,’ replied the general. ‘They do not even occupy them afterwards. They simply kill, destroy and leave.’

‘Maxtim, any thoughts?’

The warlock shrugged. ‘Not really,’ he admitted. ‘I visited one of the razed villages and could detect no sign of magical disturbance, so all I can guarantee is, whatever the reason, it has little to do with the dark

arts.'
'Many things have little to do with the dark arts, warlock. That observation does little to shed any light on the subject.'
Maxtim bowed low. 'Apologies, my king.'
'Crones, speak,' commanded the king.
'We three have watched,' replied the three, speaking in concert, their voices shimmering in a discordant harmony. 'We have seen,' they continued. 'And we know. Oh, yes. We know.'
'What do you know?'
The three decrepit crones giggled insanely. 'She was there,' they said as one.
'Who? And answer succinctly or you will earn my ire. I am not here to play your guessing games.'
'She of many names,' they harmonized. 'Morgana. The Badb, Macha and Nemain. La Fay.'
'The next words that come out of your collective mouths had better be an answer,' snapped the king. 'Or instead of three witches, I shall have a sack with three ugly heads in it, and a pile of bodies on the side.'
'The Morrigan,' chorused the witches three.
King Globolb frowned. No one liked it when the gods got involved. They were obtuse and self- absorbed. Known for the capriciousness and unpredictability. Particularly the goddess of war.
However, this most definitely presented an opportunity.
'Warlock, create a map of the kingdom, concentrate on the on the villages closest to our borders that have been destroyed by the Morrigan and her Orcs.'
Maxtim closed his eyes and drew in power. Then, slowly, he prescribed a circle in the air and, after muttering an arcane verse, he unleashed the spell. A blur of color shimmered in front of the congregation, and over the next minute it coalesced into a recognizable relief map of the surrounding kingdom. Finally, a series of red dots highlighted the villages that had been attacked.
It was a subtle spell of great skill.
The king stared at the map for a while, then he pointed. 'General Qeztal.'
'My king.'
'Those villages. There, and there. The one that has just been destroyed and the one before. They are very close to my border.'
'Yes, my king.'
'Tell me about them.'
'Just Fae villages, my king,' replied the general. 'Nothing special. Timber walls, mud and wood dwellings. Both large enough to carry a blacksmith and an inn.'
'Crops? Land? Water?'

‘Yes, my king,’ continued the general. ‘Agriculturally, they are well set. Good soil, access to the river. That one there, the village of Strander even has a tin mine.’
‘Send troops as soon as possible. I want both villages put under martial law. If there are any survivors, take them prisoner. Raise our flags. Those two villages are now under our control. Then, organize foot patrols between the border and the villages on a daily basis. Ensure we control all ways in and out.
‘From this day forth, our lands now include those two villages.’
The general nodded, but it was plain from his body language that the king’s decree concerned him.
‘You hesitate,’ noted Globolb.
‘Never, my king. You word is my command.’
‘But?’ prompted the king. ‘Speak, general. I value your input, until of course I don’t. Talk to your king.’
Qeztal licked his eyes with his long purple tongue, an obvious sign of his consternation. ‘It is just, my king, if we lay claim to those villages, won’t we be stepping on the toes of the Winter Queen?’
Globolb laughed. It was like watching a mountain during an earthquake. A mountain of fat. Chins shook, bellies wobbled, jowls shivered. ‘Worry not, general,’ said the king. ‘Ten to one, that bitch doesn’t even know her villages are being decimated. Her kingdom is too large and her consideration for her subjects too small. And even if she does know, trust me, she will do little to nothing about it. In this chaos we shall grow. It is a sign. It is our time.
‘This is the day of the goblin. Now go forth and do as I have instructed. And at the same time, mobilize our armies. This is just the beginning.’

***

The goblin army stretched out across the land. Thousands and thousands of webbed footed, round eyed, green skinned monsters. Most on foot, some mounted on giant battle-frogs.
The obese hob-goblin king lay sprawled out on a palanquin, held aloft by twenty muscular warriors. A plate of sweetmeats rested on a small table next to him
With a grunt of effort, Globolb struggled to his feet, then with a gesture he instructed one of his minor spell crafters to amplify his voice so it could be heard by the multitude of troops arrayed in front of him.
‘Loyal subjects.’
His voice boomed through the crowd. Powerful. Emotional. Inspiring. For this was Globolb’s true skill. His oratory was verbal gold.
‘Remember today,’ he said. ‘Savor it. For this day shall be remembered

for generations to come. This is the very moment that we, the goblins, decided to take charge of our own destiny. Today, we march. Today, we expand our borders. Today – we become the powerhouse we deserve to be.

‘All hail the goblin nation.’

‘All hail, king Globolb,’ shouted the army. ‘All hail.’

And with a sound like thunder, they smashed their spears against their shields and stamped their feet.

Globolb smiled. ‘Yeah, it’s good to be the king.’

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CHAPTER 7

The team stared at the man on the horse.

The queen had insisted they take a guide. Or as Merlin clarified, a spy. And that man was the Fae lord, Jingo Partridge. The selfsame one who discovered the razed village of Strander.

Unfortunately, he was not accompanied by sergeant Pillory. So, the team of hunters were in the less than desirable position of being exposed to the full brunt of the man's insufferable personality.

Troy frowned. 'Is it just me, or does that man exude such an aura of douche that I feel an almost irresistible need to punch him in the face?'

Emily shook her head. 'It's not just you,' she assured the Omega.

'You,' shouted Partridge as he gestured at Tag. 'Boy. I have a mule with the rest of my stuff. Make sure no harm comes to it. And while you're about it, check my traveling chest, you'll find a pair of boots in it. Give them a good shine, won't you? Hurry up now, that's enough shirking.'

Tag grinned. And before any of the team could stop him, he walked up to the lord, grabbed his leg and yanked him off his horse. Then he picked him up by the scruff of his shirt and held him dangling above the snow.

'Hi,' he greeted Partridge. 'You're in luck,' he continued, his voice clam. Jovial even. 'Because Tag is gonna give you a free lesson on manners. Now, concentrate.'

'What the hell?' spluttered the lord.

Tag shook his head. 'No, no, no. You don't get to talk.' He raised his hand and slapped Partridge on the cheek. A hard, stinging blow. Enough to shock, but not cause any real damage.

Then Tag began his instructions. Punctuating each point with another slap.

'You,' *slap*. 'Do not,' *slap*. 'Ever call me,' *slap*. 'Boy again,' *slap*. 'If you do,' *slap*. 'I will hit you with a closed fist,' *slap*. 'Like this,' *punch*.

Lord Partridge's head flopped down as he lost consciousness, blood streaming from his smashed lips and broken nose.

Quinton chuckled. He approved. It was the sort of lesson the Legionnaires oft distributed. Sage words of advice, mixed with a healthy portion of physical violence.

Tag, picked the lord up and draped him over his horse. Then he tore the arms off the man's shirt and used them to tie him securely to the

saddle so he didn't fall off.
'Right,' he said. 'Herein endeth the lesson.' He turned to look at Merlin. 'What? No comments?'
The wizard shook his head and grinned. 'Wouldn't dream of it,' he said. 'Now, if you're quite finished, perhaps we could get moving.'
'Yeah, sure,' grunted Tag. 'More trudging through the snow.'
'No,' interjected Emily, as she pointed at a herd of horses being seen to by a multitude of stable hands. 'We're riding. No more trudging for us. From now on, it's horseback.'
Tag frowned. 'I don't know how to ride,' he said.
'Can you sit?' asked Troy.
'Obviously.'
'Well, it's pretty much the same thing.'
Tag grinned. 'Cool, I can do that. No worries.'

***

The big man sat astride the massive war horse that the Winter Queen's stable had allocated to him. The stallion's name was Rork.
When Tag had asked one of the stable hands what the name meant, the lower Fae stared at him blankly for a few seconds and then answered. 'It means, Rork.'
Tag nodded. That made sense.
Unfortunately, even though the stallion was a superior piece of horse flesh, Tag was not a comparable rider. He had a seat like a huge burlap sack filled with watermelons. Lumpy, ungainly and awkward.
When the horse went up, Tag went down. When the stallion heeled to the right, Tag leaned left. It was like he was the anti-rider.
He ached in places he never even knew he had. Particularly his rear end. Until this moment, Tag had never known that one's ass had so many delicate nerve endings.
Emily trotted up next to the big man. 'Stop fighting him,' she said.
'Not,' grunted Tag.
'Are so,' insisted Emily. 'You're all tense. You keep hauling back on the reins, and at the same time you're squeezing your knees. Rork doesn't know whether he should halt or run.'
'Why's he bounce up and down so much?' asked Tag with a wince.
'He doesn't,' said Emily. 'You do.'
'No way, I'm trying not to. He's the one doing the bouncing. It's like trying to ride a frigging kangaroo. And my buttocks are like chopped liver. I'm one big bruise.'
Emily laughed. 'Stop trying not to bounce,' she advised.
'If I do that, it'll hurt even more.'
'Trust me, big man,' said Emily. 'I been riding since I could walk. Relax. Stop trying. Just go with the flow. Adjust mentally. I'm serious,

imagine you are sitting on a sofa in a lounge. Smooth. Even. No bouncing. Don't go limp, just chill.'
Tag got an expression of utter concentration on his face.
'What are you doing?' asked Emily.
'Chilling.'
'That's not how you chill,' said Emily. 'Come on, Tag. Relax.'
The big man let out a sigh and Emily saw him visibly loosen up. His shoulders dropped slightly, the constant grimace softened into a look of mild consternation and his breathing slowed.
A few minutes later, he smiled. 'Hey, girly, it sorta works.'
'Feel good?'
'No, just not absolutely awful. I feel like I might actually live through the day.'
'Well, that goes without saying,' quipped Emily. 'After all, you're unkillable.'
'Maybe, maybe not,' said Tag. 'Ain't never had a horse try to kill me before. Maybe horses are my Achille's elbow.'
'Heel,' corrected Emily.
'What?'
'Nothing, never mind.' She twitched her reins and trotted forward to ride alongside Troy, leaving the big man to his new-found riding skills.
'He thinks he has problems,' muttered Troy. 'My horse is so terrified of me; I'm surprised it can move.'
Emily glanced at the Omega's mount and conceded he was correct. Its eyes kept rolling back into its head, showing almost completely white orbs, its flanks were covered in sweat, despite the cool weather, and it jumped and tracked sideways at any sound or extraneous movement.
'How come yours is fine?' asked Troy.
Emily leaned forward and patted her mount's neck. It whickered softly in pleasure. 'Because Golden knows I'm not going to eat her,' she said.
'Golden?'
'It's her name. What's yours called?'
Troy shrugged. 'Horse. What do I care?'
'You see,' said Emily. 'That's why he's scared of you.'
'Crap. Anyway, I'm not going to eat him.'
'He doesn't know that. Hell, Troy, you don't even know his name. Come on, sweetheart, show some love.'
'Troy patted the horse on the head.
'Okay, now do it with some feeling. Say something nice.'
Troy repeated the gesture. 'Umm – good horse,' he said. 'Don't be scared. I'm probably not going to eat you. Unless I get really hungry.'
Emily pulled her mount closer to the wolfman and punched him on the shoulder. Hard enough to shift him sideways in the saddle. 'Don't

be such a dick. Do it again.'
This time, Troy stroked the horse's neck. 'Sorry, fella,' he said. 'Thanks for carrying me. Sure beats walking. I don't know your name, but I think I'll call you, Stanley, if that's okay with you.'
'Stanley?' questioned Emily.
'Sure, why not. It's a good name.'
'For a horse?'
'Specially for a horse.'
Emily studied Stanley. He appeared to be slightly more at ease. He still looked nervous, but he no longer seemed terrified.
'Fine,' she acquiesced. 'Stanley it is.'
Then she urged her horse forward to the head of the column to catch up with Merlin and the gods. As she did, her legionaries spurred their mounts and formed a hard diamond around her.
First, she passed Muller. He was riding next to lord Partridge, who was still unconscious and strapped to his saddle. The knight was making sure the upper-class idiot didn't fall off and break something else.
Emily noticed he was counting off prayers on his rosary as he rode.
Muller the Pious.
Pulling up next to the wizard, she rode in comfortable silence for a few minutes.
'How long until we get to Strander?' she asked.
'Twenty minutes or so,' answered Merlin. 'There may have been a shorter route, but unfortunately our guide-come-spy is still unconscious, thanks to Tag.'
'Can't say I blame the big man,' noted Emily.
Merlin raised an eyebrow. 'Not at all. In fact, the lord can thank his lucky stars. I was mere seconds away from doing him a lot more damage than Tag did. In fact, I was both pleased and surprised at how controlled the big man was. Lord idiot is lucky to be alive.'
'And you think we should be able to track the Morrigan from the village?'
'Undoubtably. Firstly, we have you and Troy. Secondly, a bunch of gods. And, finally, she won't be trying to hide her path. Remember, she wants us to find her so she can punish us. Or carry out some twisted vendetta of vengeance. Who knows what she's thinking? The only thing we can be certain of, this time I am not holding back.'
'You can kill a god?'
Merlin shrugged. 'Haven't yet. But I can definitely give it a go.'
Quinton moved forward, bringing his horse closer. 'We're being watched,' he said.
'I know,' replied both Emily and Merlin in unison.
'On the hill line,' continued Emily. 'Orcs. Every few miles.'

Quinton nodded. ‘I assume Orcs are the big ugly mothers with tusks like warthogs.’
Emily nodded.
‘Yeah, well, there’s something else.’
‘What?’ asked Merlin.
‘Green skinned buggers. Smaller. Dressed in cloaks and skins. Carrying wooden staffs. They’re in amongst the brush, halfway down the mountains. A lot closer than the Orc things. Sneaky little thugs. Only caught a couple of glimpses of them. Not sure how many are out there; I can only say two for sure.’
‘Goblins,’ said Merlin.
‘Where?’ asked the Prof, who had been riding in almost silence, apart from a continual low mutter as he argued with himself over some mathematical theorem or other.
The commandant repeated what he had told Merlin.
‘That will be goblin shaman trackers,’ ventured the Prof ‘Odd. You usually only see them if the goblins are out in numbers.’
‘Perhaps they have joined forces with the Orcs,’ suggested Emily.
The Prof shook his head. ‘Never. They are bitter enemies. Most likely they are simply keeping an eye on the Orcs, while the Orcs keep an eye on us.’
Emily heard a low moan from behind her, and turned to see lord Jingo Partridge struggling to sit up on his horse, pulling his restraints off as he did so.
‘What?’ he mumbled. ‘Was I run over by a carriage? Where am I?’ He stared blankly at Muller. Then he glanced at Tag who was riding beside him, still jolting up and down in the saddle, but not quite as much as before.
‘You,’ said Partridge. ‘Boy. What the hell is going on?’
This time, Tag merely slapped him. A swift, open handed blow that sounded like a gunshot. The moronic lord tumbled from the saddle and into the snow, once more in an unconscious state.
‘You know, if you keep knocking him out, he’s most likely going to get brain damage,’ noted Muller, laconically.
‘You reckon?’ asked Tag.
‘Yep.’
‘How would anyone be able to tell?’ asked the big man. ‘He’s already as thick as pig-poo.’
‘Whatever,’ answered Muller. ‘You going to pick him up and put him back on his horse?’
Tag frowned. Then he pulled back on his reins, dismounted and threw the incompetent lord back into his saddle. Using a length of rope, he tied him to the girth to ensure he didn’t fall off. Then he remounted.
‘Come on, Rork. Let’s mosey on up to the front and see what’s afoot.’

Muller grinned. Then he took his rosary out and continued with his Hail Mary's.
As Tag trotted up alongside Emily, they saw the first signs of the village.
Quinton pointed. 'Smoke.'
'Reckon the place is still burning?' asked Tag.
The commandant shook his head. 'That's not wholesale fire. Look, maybe six or seven small fires. Those are either camp fires or fireplaces.'
'I thought all of the villagers were dead,' noted Emily.
'Over there,' said Quinton. 'More of those little green guys with staffs.'
Merlin held up his hand to halt the small column. 'Latobias. You are the most familiar with this realm. What do you think is going on?'
The god of wind thought for a few seconds. 'My guess would be, the goblins have appropriated the village. And judging by that fact they have so many shamans, I reckon they are here in force.'
'How many?' asked Emily.
'I wouldn't know. But experience tells me, hundreds. If not more. Could number in the low thousands.'
'I'm not sure what is going on,' said Merlin. 'But I do know one thing, I have no wish for us to be caught in some unnecessary battle with a Goblin war-party. Let's skirt around, see if we can pick up the Morrigan's trail without attracting too much attention from the green monsters.'
'Too late,' said Troy.
'Why?
The Omega pointed. 'Those. Whatever the hell those are.'
'Darn it,' cussed Merlin. 'Battle frogs.'
'Frogs?' questioned Tag.
'Yes,' responded Merlin. 'Huge frogs. They ride them into battle.'
'I don't sweat frogs,' laughed the big man.
'Maybe you don't. but I suggest everybody else does. They have a poisonous bite, and the goblins riding them are considered elite soldiers.'
'There's so many of them,' noted Emily.
And she was correct. Hundreds of the frog-mounted goblins poured out of the forest, ululating and waving their lances as they came.
At the same time, rank after rank of goblin foot soldiers began to march over the rise in double time, also heading towards the hunters.
'We are seriously outnumbered here,' said Merlin.
'We can take them,' said Tag.
Merlin nodded his agreement. 'Most likely, we could. However, technically, these are still the Winter Queen's subjects. If we attack them, we may very well fall foul of her.'

‘We wouldn’t be attacking,’ argued Emily. ‘We would be defending.’
‘Mere semantics,’ said Merlin. ‘If the Queen decided we attacked, her decree is the law.’
‘You want missus Jones to have a word?’ asked Tag.
Merlin shook his head. ‘Hold your fire. Everyone, prepare to retreat. Latobias, Sirona, Belenas. Could you slow them down? Give us time to make a tactical withdrawal. I would prefer we avoid a full-scale battle until we have more info. At very least I need to speak to the Queen.’
The three gods had a quick conversation, then Latobias called forth a sweeping storm of wind. Sirona did her usual water-based accompaniment, filling the frigid air with golf ball sized drops of water that froze almost instantly. Latobias’s winds picked up the hailstones and hammered them into the approaching goblins like machinegun fire.
Belenas reverted to type, swinging his huge hammer and slamming into the earth below the snow. Immediately, the shivering ground gave birth to a myriad of avalanches, driving massive waves of snow down the mountains and into the charging battle-frog cavalry.
‘They don’t have a huge repertoire, do they,’ quipped Troy with a smirk. ‘It’s always the same. Wind, ice, earthquakes.’
‘Well, if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it,’ returned Emily. ‘And let’s face it, it’s all pretty much wrath-of-god type stuff.’
‘Point taken,’ conceded Troy.
‘Enough chatting,’ snapped Merlin. ‘Follow me,’
The wizard took off at a gallop and the rest of the team were fast on his tail.
Behind them, the goblin army struggled blindly through the snow storm and shaking ground.

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CHAPTER 8

‘Why don’t you sit down?’ asked Emily.
Tag shook his head. ‘Ain’t never gonna be able to sit again,’ he mumbled. ‘My ass wonders why I gone to war on it. That ride back was the worst.’
‘I thought you healed right up, whatever the injury,’ interjected Troy.
‘So did I,’ admitted Tag. ‘But for some reason, I still got sore buttocks. Maybe it’s just like muscle memory or something. Who knows? It appears I may have an Achilles ass.’
‘This is very interesting,’ interjected the Prof ‘Perhaps some form of equine based bacteria may be involved. I definitely think we all need to take a much closer look at why this is happening.’
Tag stared at the ancient scholar. ‘My ass?’ he asked. ‘You think you all need to take a much closer look at my ass?’
‘Yes,’ confirmed the Prof ‘Who knows what we might learn from it?’
The big man shook his head. ‘I’ll tell you what you gonna learn. You gonna learn that no one takes a close look at Tag’s rear end. Okay? And that’s that.’
‘But…’
Tag held his hand up. ‘No more. That’s it, I’m serious, Prof Now stop before it gets creepy. Well, creepier.’
Any further discussion vis-a-vie Tag’s posterior stalled as Merlin barged back into the room, arriving directly from his meeting with the queen.
With a face like thunder, he fell into one of the sumptuous armchairs and blew out a long sigh.
‘Problems?’ asked Emily.
‘Huge,’ admitted the wizard.
‘You informed the Queen about the goblins?’
Merlin nodded. ‘She wanted corroboration, so she asked to speak to lord idiot. Unfortunately, I had to inform her that he was currently indisposed due to being repeatedly smacked into unconsciousness.’
‘Bet that went down well,’ chuckled Troy.
‘Like a lead balloon,’ confirmed Merlin. ‘But she was convinced, nonetheless. And she is pissed. Of course, she says it’s all our fault.’
Emily grimaced. ‘In a way, I suppose it is.’
‘I second that,’ admitted Merlin. ‘Anyway, the Queen is mobilizing her army. She says it will take a few weeks, due to the fact that her army is actually a bunch of different armies run and paid for by her lords.

You know, the usual feudal type system. Very efficient when it comes to saving money for the royal budget, but extremely inefficient when it comes to actually waging war.
'Eventually, she plans to fall on the goblins like a tsunami. Allegedly at any rate. But before she does, she has tasked us with a few jobs. Mainly, do a bit of scouting regarding the goblins and, secondly, sort out our problem with the Orcs. She wants the Orc problem dealt with before she sends retribution the way of the goblins. You see, she doesn't want to get drawn into a battle on two fronts.'
'She doesn't want to try a bit of diplomacy first?' questioned Muller. 'Perhaps send an envoy to the goblin king and warn him to back off or else.'
Merlin shook his head. 'That would be perceived as weakness. Not only by the goblins, but also the Orcs. And many of the Fae nobles. No, the only avenue open to her is swift and violent reprisal. They encroached on her land; they pay the price.'
'How come she hasn't sent any of that vengeance the way of the Orcs?' asked Emily.
'She is relying on us to do that. The difference being, the Orcs are not making a concerted effort to take land from her and her subjects. They are merely carrying out acts of terrorism. They do not make any attempt to occupy the villages they raze. No, to the Queen, they are a nuisance. But the goblins have become an actual threat.'
'How will the goblins react?' asked Emily.
Merlin shrugged. 'I don't know the current king. But every few hundred years or so, the little monsters get delusions of grandeur and seek to expand their kingdom into the lands of the Fae. Even though, technically, the Winter Queen is their monarch as well. It never ends well. And it never ends swiftly either. The Fae armies are powerful, but goblins spawn like frogs. There are countless thousands of them. And although they are not the greatest of warriors, we all know that quantity has its own quality.'
'Right then,' said Tag. 'We saddle up, find these Orcs and introduce them to missus Jones. Then go home.'
'What about the goblins?' asked Emily.
'Not our problem,' answered Tag. 'We got an Orc problem. The Queen got a goblin problem.'
'But she made them our problem,' interjected Merlin.
'So what?' stated Tag. 'We go home, what's she going to do?'
Merlin shook his head. 'Tag,' he answered. 'You do not want to go there. We have enough on our plates without upsetting one of the most powerful rulers in the two realms. If she felt offended enough, she would never rest. We would spend the rest of our natural lives avoiding Fae assassins. Trust me, big man, we need to conclude this.

Orcs and goblins.
‘Latobias,’ continued the wizard.
‘Merlin.’
‘Can you do something about transport? Leaping about using portals is all well and good, but I was thinking about something that we can observe the land from.’
Latobias shook his head. ‘You know as well as I do,’ he answered. ‘Earth technology doesn’t work very well in the Fae realm. I could transport a helicopter here, but most likely, all we would have is a large steel cabin that couldn’t go anywhere.’
Merlin stared at the Celtic god, one eye raised, as if waiting for the rest of his answer.
‘What?’ snapped Latobias.
‘Come on, Latobias,’ urged the wizard. ‘You, the god of wind and travel, are telling me that there is nothing you can do in the land of the Fae because of a few technological problems? I’m not sure if I believe you.’
Latobias looked guilty, but he didn’t answer.
Merlin continued to stare.
After almost a minute of uncomfortable silence, the Celtic god cracked first.
‘Okay, fine,’ he said. ‘We can approach the dwarves. If we have to.’
‘The dwarves?’ asked Emily.
Latobias nodded. ‘The Understone clan. Live at the top of Megagran Mountain. Well, in tunnels near the top. They make airships.’
‘Airships?’
‘Zeppelins. Dirigibles,’ explained Latobias. ‘Huge blimps filled with hot air and powered by steam driven propellors. Capable of carrying all of us with ease.’
‘Well, that sounds perfect,’ said Emily. ‘Why all the hesitation?’
Latobias shook his head. ‘It’s going to be outrageously expensive,’ he said. ‘And the dwarves are extremely difficult to deal with. Also, it’s not an easy trip getting there. They have numerous runes and protections to prevent any portals opening within a hundred miles of their underground city.’
Sirona chuckled. ‘It’s not just that,’ she added. ‘It’s the fact that the dwarves deny the existence of Latobias. They worship Ukko, the Nordic weather god.’
‘Pah!’ exclaimed Latobias. ‘That idiot. All mountain storms and snow and ice. No depth to his command of the winds. It’s all blow, blow, blow. He’s a proper blowhard, no pun intended.’
‘Hold on,’ interjected Muller. ‘There’s another god of wind and weather?’
‘Loads,’ said Belenas. ‘Yu Shi, Chinese rain god. That odorous

Tezcatlipoca, Aztec hurricane god. Chaac, Mayan rain god. Indra, Hindu storm god…'
'Alright,' snapped Latobias. 'They get the picture. And anyway, let's not forget the plethora of laughter gods. Maximon, Bast, Soma, Mok Chi, Ninkasi…'
Belenas shrugged. 'Not part of my remit any more,' he said. 'I'm the god of depression now. And by balderdash, that is a pretty unique niche.'
'Apart from Oizys, Miseria, Nyx, Erebus,' interjected Sirona.
'Oh, shut it, water girl,' snapped Belenas.
'Enough,' roared Merlin. 'Worse than children. Stop it. Now, Latobias, where, how and when?'
'We can start as soon as we're kitted out,' answered the god. 'Food, horses, weapons. Same as before. I can portal us as close as possible to the mountain and then we ride from there.'
'Oh no,' sighed Tag. 'My poor…'
'That's enough, Tag,' snapped Merlin. 'Come on, let's get ready.'

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CHAPTER 9

‘A snow drift,’ said Tag. ‘You dropped us into a snow drift.’
Latobias shrugged. ‘Sorry. Portaling over such large distances isn’t an exact science.’
‘I’m freezing,’ moaned the big man.
‘Are you?’ asked the god. ‘Or do you just think you should be? After all that Ben Chu training, I would have thought you were pretty impervious to the cold.’
Tag frowned. ‘True,’ he admitted. ‘But it was pretty unpleasant, landing in twenty feet of snow. For a moment there, I thought I had gone blind.’
‘Would you have preferred to have ridden the first few hundred miles instead?’
Tag shook his head. ‘Point. Okay, snow drift, no problem.’
‘Although we still have over a hundred miles yet to go,’ added Latobias.
The team rode in single file, letting Latobias and the gods take point. As had become usual, Emily rode in the middle of the column, her Legionnaires riding in front and behind her, weapons hot.
They plodded through the deep snow at a little over human walking pace. Emily guessed, if it was one hundred miles, it would take them around thirty hours of saddle time. If they rode for eight hours a day, they should be close to their destination in three or four days.

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The sun rose over the horizon and spread its winter-glow across the white landscape. It was the morning of the fourth day and Latobias had assured the team they would reach their destination before lunch.
All of them were saddle sore and, even though they were hardened against the cold, the temperature had dropped to the point that the shaggy-haired mountain horses needed blankets.
It was so uncomfortable even Tag had stopped complaining, conserving his energy in order to stop becoming a human popsicle.
The route became more difficult to traverse as the trail grew steeper and steeper. After another hour, the team had to dismount and lead the horses, helping them clamber up the increasingly trepid mountain path. Every icy step became an exercise in caution. A gamble as to how much longer they could continue without one of them

plummeting down the mountain to their untimely demise.
The wind picked up, hammering them with swirling snow and bits of ice, slowing their progress even more.
Latobias used his power to deaden the wind as much as possible, but unusually, he could not control it as fully as he normally did.
'Problems?' questioned Merlin, shouting to be heard above the shrieking wind.
'It's that douche nozzle, Ukko,' replied Latobias. 'He's flexing his muscles. Trying to show his supremacy over me.'
'Can you take him?'
The Celtic god of wind smiled. But it was not an expression of amusement. More a look of sardonic intent. 'Maybe. It is his domain. And it might destroy this mountain if we tried to battle.'
'So, that would be a no,' confirmed Merlin.
'Most likely a no,' affirmed Latobias. 'But it may come to that,' he continued. 'Whatever, I am confident I can suppress it enough to ensure our survival. As long as we find the entrance to the dwarven city fairly soon.'
Latobias turned to Sirona and Belenas. The three had a brief conflab and then the Celtic god nodded.
'Between us, we should be able to sense the entrance,' he informed Merlin. 'Even though douche-nozzle is trying his best to hide it from us.'
'Why would he do that?' asked Emily, who had joined them.
'Professional jealousy,' replied Latobias. 'General dick-headedness. Who knows?'
The column bunched up as they gathered close enough to see each other through the driving snow and sleet.
The three gods walked forward as though they were taking a summer stroll. However, the rest of the team, even the supernaturals, struggled. And the Legionnaires remained upright and ambulatory through sheer willpower and a refusal to be overcome, despite every step being a battle.
After a lifetime of struggling, or perhaps it was only half an hour, Latobias held up his right hand, bringing them to a halt.
They gathered together around him.
'He pointed at a sheer cliff face, most of it covered in ice and snow. 'Here.'
'I see no entrance,' said Emily.
Latobias gestured to Belenas. 'I will attempt to clear the snow,' he said to him. 'As I do, you should see a doorway. It will not be immediately apparent, but the outline should be perceptible. A slight crack in the rockface. I would ask you to please use your hammer to knock. And do not hold back.'

Belenas frowned. ‘If I don’t hold back, this mountain won’t stay standing. let alone some doorway.’
Latobias shook his head. ‘Trust me, Belenas,’ he urged. ‘Strike swiftly and strike hard. We need to gain the gatekeeper’s attention, and only the stoutest of blows will do.’
The god of depression shrugged. ‘Okay,’ he acquiesced. ‘By peas and rice, if you say so.’
‘I do,’ retorted Latobias as he hunched his shoulders, building power in order to throw back the ice and snow that concealed the entrance he was convinced lay before them.
With a shout of effort, the Celtic god unleashed the storm. Thunder cracked; lightning flashed across the darkening skies. The wind whipped up into a fury as the power of Latobias and Ukko vied head-to-head.
The fury of the Celtic warrior against the wrath of the Viking.
Claymore versus bearded axe.
The team watched on in awe as the skirl of the pipes clashed against the chants of Viking war cries.
The very air itself became difficult to breath.
Viscous.
Like it was part blood. A living entity.
And slowly, the ice and snow covering the cliff face began to crumble and dissipate.
Latobias was on his knees, blood poured from his ears as he ground his teeth and clenched his fists until there were but two cramped claws of bone and flesh.
Still, he fought on. Pushing back against Ukko’s manifestation of ice and snow.
With a cry of joy, Belenas spotted the outline of the entrance to the dwarven kingdom. And, raising his massive hammer high, he struck the cliff face.
Once.
Twice.
Thrice.
The stone boomed and shivered. Avalanches thundered down the mountainside, careering towards the team. A tsunami of ice and snow.
Belenas struck again.
The cliff face began to move. With glacier-like speed, the humongous stone doorway creaked open. Fully fifty feet thick, it groaned and shivered as it swung inwards to reveal a chamber carved into the living rock itself.
Sirona grabbed Latobias under his arm and dragged him through the opening.
Merlin shouted for the rest to follow, and they did, as fast as they

could, slapping the horses' flanks and running alongside them.
As they got through the opening, the doorway began to close. Thumping shut like the end of days, leaving the team in complete silence.
And utter darkness.

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CHAPTER 10

Merlin mumbled an incantation and a large ball of blue-white light formed above the group. It was probably the equivalent of around five or six hundred normal household light bulbs, and still, its illumination was ineffectual in the vastness of the cavern.

The roof was lost in darkness, and they could only see the walls adjacent to the entrance. The smoothness and regular angles of said walls showed the cavern was not natural. It was obvious it had been carved out of the living rock itself. A feat that beggared imagination.

'Identify yourselves,' boomed a voice.

The team peered into the darkness, but even Emily and Troy could make out nothing.

'I am the wizard, Merlin. And these are my companions. We are on a quest and seek to parley with the Understone clan of Megagran Mountain.'

'Welcome here, ye are not,' returned the voice.

'Yet you let us in,' countered Merlin.

'The righteous blow of a hammer may not be refused by dwarvenkind. Tis a moral imperative.'

'Well, we are here now,' continued the wizard. 'Will you show us the courtesy we deserve, or will you continue to bellow at us from the cover of darkness?'

There was no immediate answer. The silence stretched out for over a minute.

Then the vast hall began to fill with orange torchlight. Thousands of sconces flared into flame. Most likely supplied by natural gas.

Then the sound of marching feet. As the torchlight revealed more of the cavern, they saw a company of heavily armored and armed dwarves march into view.

Ten rows of fifty.

Five hundred, short, bearded, heavily muscled warriors. Each carried a shield and either a war hammer or a battle axe. Their armor differed slightly, but on the whole, each was protected by a steel helm, a breastplate, a metal studded leather kilt and stout iron boots.

And at the head of the welcome committee, strode a dwarf, resplendent in gold chased armor. He had no shield, but carried a huge war hammer. The muscles on his bare arms stood out like granite boulders, and his red beard reached almost to his knees.

While the rest of the company crashed to a halt, he continued on,

walking up to within a few feet of Merlin.
'Of you I have heard, Myrddin Wyllt,' he stated. It was obvious his was the booming voice that had been addressing them earlier. 'I be Hammerson Rockbiter, Mine Captain of the Understone clan.'
Merlin bowed. 'I see you, Mine Captain.'
Hammerson bowed back. 'And I see you, wizard. You ken our traditions. How is that?'
'I knew Axgrinder Rockbiter. We fought alongside each other in the Deep-Down wars.'
Hammerson raised a bushy eyebrow. 'My great, great, great grandfather. So, it be true,' he said. 'Ancient are you.'
'Do all these dudes talk like Yoda?' asked Tag in his usual stage-whisper volume.
Hammerson turned to the big man. 'And who might you be?'
'Luke Skywalker, might I be,' quipped Tag.
Emily punched him on the shoulder. Hard enough to rock him sideways.
'Sorry,' he continued. 'I'm Tag. Well, that's what they call me. It's actually a nickname, but seems like it's sorta become my real name by now. Although people have started calling me, The Immortal and some say Big Man. Master Chu often shakes his head and mutters something under his breath. Not sure what he's actually saying.
'Sorry about the Yoda comment. But in all fairness, he's quite cool and the first three movies were real. Not like the last lot. They were all crap.'
As usual, Tag's flowing combination of irrelevance and non-sequiturs brought Hammerson's train of enquiry to an abrupt halt, as he attempted to catch up with the stream of consciousness that passed as thought in Tag's verbal discourse.
Merlin chuckled. 'Allow me to introduce my companions,' he said.
He went through them, starting with Emily and Troy, moving on through Tag, Muller, Quinton, the Legionnaires and the Prof
Then he presented Sirona, Belenas and finally, Latobias.
Hammerson bowed deeply to each of them. Until Merlin introduced Latobias. Then the dwarf Mine Captain merely turned his back as if the Celtic god did not even exist.
Latobias shook his head. 'Oh, I see,' he said. 'So that's how they're going to play it. Idiotic, diminutive little mole-people.'
Latobias's mumble of ire was interrupted by the chilling sound of missus Jones whirring into action as Tag turned on the power to her barrels.
Responding to the weapons call to action, the Legionnaires swung their weapons to the ready position, and the metallic clatter of rifles being charged echoed through the cavern.

The dwarves were unaware of what the human weapons were, but it was obvious by their body language that violence was in the immediate offing. So, they in turn readied their weapons.
'Tag. No,' commanded Merlin.
The big man shook his head. 'The little dude just insulted Latobias,' he said. 'Now I don't claim to know much, but I do know this - you insult my friends, you insult me. And Tag don't take lightly to being dissed by dwarves.'
There was a mumble of agreement from the rest of the team of hunters. Except from the Prof, who stood with a finger to his chin, a look of polite interest on his face.
Merlin stared at Muller, raising an eyebrow as he did. 'What?' he asked. 'You as well? I thought you had more sense.'
The knight shrugged. 'Tag is my friend,' he said.
Tag nodded. 'Right on, pious dude. I'd high five you, but missus Jones is demanding my full attention right now, and she can be a difficult girl if you don't pay her enough attention.'
'What is happening?' asked Hammerson. 'Why gird you your loins for battle?'
'You insulted Latobias,' replied Merlin.
Hammerson frowned. 'Understand I do not. How can one insult what does not exist?'
'There you go again, little dude,' snapped Tag. 'Now apologize, or me and missus Jones are gonna redecorate this place with various shades of dwarf.'
'Hold on,' interjected the Prof 'What we have here is a failure to communicate,' he continued. 'Mister Hammerson means no disrespect. In fact, his actions have no meaning whatsoever. You see, Tag, dwarvish religious doctrine dictates that Ukko is the sole god of wind and weather.
'However, unlike many humans and various types of Fae who acknowledge the existence of many gods with similar areas of control, Dwarvish dogma insists that their canon of belief is the only truth. *Ergo*, Latobias does not exist. Or to be more accurate, Latobias does not exist when he is introduced as the god of wind and weather.'
Tag frowned. 'So, what you saying is, if Merlin introduces Latobias as a friend who has nothing to do with the Celtic god he actually is, then the little guy will acknowledge him?'
The Prof chuckled. 'Unfortunately, no.'
'Why?'
'Because, and this is where things get a little complicated, he knows that Latobias does exist. And he knows he is the Celtic god of wind and weather. For, if he did not, then he would not be able to deny his existence by ignoring him.'

‘Hold on,’ said Emily. ‘You are basically saying, the only way the Dwarves can deny Latobias’s existence is by actually acknowledging the self-same thing.’
‘Yes.’
‘That makes no sense whatsoever,’ snapped Emily. ‘It’s insane.’
Muller laughed. ‘Try spending a few years in the Vatican. Trust me, this sort of existential dichotomy is an everyday thing. The last Pope, may he reign forever in God’s name, dictated that we had to stop killing vampires because they didn’t exist. So, if they didn’t exist, how were we killing them. Mark my words, when it comes to religion, no stretch is too far.’
‘Yet you follow it,’ pointed out the Prof
Muller shrugged. ‘Never said the system was perfect.’
Tag cocked his head to one side. One could almost hear his mind turning over as he plowed through the contradictions set before him.
Then he raised missus Jones, aimed at a distant flaming torch and squeezed the trigger. A mere one and a half second burst.
One hundred and fifty rounds of 7.62 mm rounds spewed out of the revolving barrels. Every sixth one was a strontium nitrate tracer round. These left a bright red line of fire from barrel to target.
The stream of fire smashed the torch to nothingness and hammered a large glowing hole into the living rock. Glowing ricochets spun and buzzed about the cavern, further enhancing both the gatling guns massive destructive power, and its staggeringly incredible visual effect.
It looked like Tag had unleashed a dragon.
‘Enough,’ he thundered. ‘Apologize and acknowledge Latobias, or I swear, your contradictory, confusing Dwarvish ass is going to be toast.’
Merlin readied himself for what he expected to be an instant aggressive response from the Dwarvish warriors. But the ancient wizard had not taken into account the sheer enormity of destructive power Tag had so casually unleashed.
And although the Dwarves were brave and stoic to a fault, they were not suicidal. And it took little imagination as to what the effect would be if Tag kept that firestorm up for more than a brief second.
Any weapon that powerful would surely cut through their ranks like a hot poker through Jell-O. And the Dwarves were nothing if not pragmatic. Even when it came to religious doctrine.
Actually, particularly when it came to religious doctrine. After all, weren’t the gods meant to be all understanding and all forgiving?
Id Est, they would understand that being chewed up by a fire breathing weapon like missus Jones would be extremely detrimental to one’s health.

Hammerson Rockbiter stepped forward and banged his fist against his vest in salute. ‘Greeting, Latobias, Celtic god of wind and weather. I see you.’

‘And I see you, Hammerson Rockbiter, son of Shovelbeard, son of Deepdigger, son of Seamfinder, son of Axgrinder. Mine Captain and wielder of the Warhammer, Goblinsmiter. Deep may your shafts sink and long may your seams run.’

Hammerson went down on one knee. ‘My lord,’ he said. ‘Honor me, you do. How may I of service be?’

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CHAPTER 11

The dwarves did not have a king, as such. They ruled by committee.
Each clan had a supreme elder who was referred to as the Mine Master. Working with him, a group of four advisors named the Tunnel Masters. The dwarf in charge of actual mining operations, who was held in high esteem by all, was also part of the ruling committee and was named, Rock Master.
Strangely, the dwarf in charge of the warriors was named as Mine Captain. Even though he had little to do with actual mining.
Once a year the five major Dwarven clans met and hashed out mining rights, trade agreements, military boundaries and various other commercial treaties.
The team of hunters stood in front of the current Mine Master of the Understone clan, Master Dunan Cavebender. On either side of him sat the rest of the clan committee, save Hammerson who stood between Merlin and Latobias.
Behind them stood the bulk of the Understone clan. Standing in neat rows, waiting for the verdict on Mine Captain Hammerstone's alleged blasphemous act.
The tension in the air was a palpable thing.
Dwarvish religious doctrine had been sundered and, quite frankly, the committee had no idea how to take it. There was no precedent and thus, no set rules for the handling of the situation.
And Dwarves loved rules. Almost as much as they loved logic. But not nearly as much as they loved gold.
Mine Master Cavebender cleared his throat. 'At a loss we are,' he admitted. 'After careful and thorough study of the religious edicts, a conclusion the committee has come to. And we deem no wrong has Mine Captain Hammerson done in acknowledging the presence of the Celtic god, Latobias.'
There was a subdued ripple of surprise from the crowd.
The Mine Master held his hand up for silence.
'Concluded have we, the edict that demands Latobias be ignored as not existing, is an obvious logical fallacy based on a circular argument that assumes the acknowledgment of the same in order to action the reverse.
'In other words, you can only ignore what patently exists. Therefore, to ignore Latobias one must admit his existence. So, it follows, to admit his existence patently acknowledges that he be real.

‘Thus, the edict, *ignore Latobias as he does not exist*, is a logical fallacy and from this day forth stricken from the rules and records of the clan it is. Obviously, ratified at the yearly clan meeting this will have to be.’
The Mine Master turned to Hammerson. ‘Mine Captain,’ he said. ‘Thousands of years of tradition have you managed to overturn. Not sure am I whether to condemn or congratulate you.’
Hammerson bowed low, accepting his pardon with humility.
‘Now, Merlin,’ said the Mine Master. ‘Pray tell us why you have graced our caves.’
‘We traveled here under the recommendation of Latobias,’ answered the wizard. ‘We seek an airship, and he told us that the Understone clan are the best when it comes to manufacturing such artifacts.’
‘True be that statement,’ agreed the Master. ‘But likewise be it specious. As the only clan that manufactures airships are we.’
‘I was led to believe the Mountain Dray clan also constructed airships,’ interjected Latobias.
‘Ha, say I,’ exclaimed the Master. ‘And ha again. One cannot call those graceless, lumbering bags, airships. Travesties of the word be they. Mere flying pigs as opposed to our magnificent erections.’
‘And that is why we came here,’ returned Latobias.
The Master thought for a while. ‘What size?’
‘Large enough to carry the team you see before you, plus supplies and room for perhaps another half dozen bodies.’
‘That is a large vessel. Do you have a crew?’
‘I will pilot, my team will crew.’
‘When will you need it?’
‘Now.’
The Master frowned. ‘It can be done. But it will be prohibitively expensive.’
‘How much?’ asked Latobias, getting straight to the point.
The Master mentioned a sum. ‘In gold or jewels,’ he added. ‘Both subject to appraisal by one of our assayers. I will give you time to confer with your colleagues.’
Latobias beckoned to Merlin and Emily. ‘It’s a lot of money,’ he said by way of opening.
‘Not really,’ denied Merlin. ‘The problem is, it has to be in the form of gold or jewels. Most of our wealth is in Earth currency, property, shares and such what.’
Belenas stomped over. ‘Problem, by Jupiter’s smelly armpits?’ he asked.
‘You heard him say how much they wanted,’ said Latobias. ‘We’re just wondering how to get hold of so much gold or jewels at such short notice.’

‘Oh, that’s easy,’ said Belenas. ‘Ask the snot-gobbling, shiny-man.’
‘Good point,’ said Latobias.
‘Can you get hold of him?’ asked Merlin.
Latobias simply raised an eyebrow.
‘Merlin chuckled. ‘Sorry.’
Latobias asked the surrounding dwarves to stand back. Then he concentrated and, using a mere thought and gesture, opened a crackling oval portal, marginally smaller than a normal household door. Those that could peered into it.
Standing on the other side was a short, wide, muscular being dressed in jeans, a cut-off leather waistcoat and around a hundred pounds of gold chasing and sparkling gems.
Tag let out a whoop. ‘Yo, Grannus, my man. You gone full mister T. Way to go. Smoking.’
Grannus looked up, his face set in his usual thunderous scowl.
Emily looked closer and noted that he appeared to be inside a bank vault. Broken safety deposit boxes lined the wall behind him, and piles of various valuables lay scattered across the vaults floor.
‘What?’ he grunted. ‘Can’t you see I’m busy?’
‘How’s the hunt going?’ asked Merlin.
‘Have I gotten hold of you to tell you about my myriad of successes regarding the huge amounts of the *Triginta* I have found thus far?’ asked the god of Bling.
Merlin shook his head. ‘Can’t say that you have.’
‘Well, that answers your question, Gandalf,’ snapped Grannus. ‘That bloody Fae scavenger keeps beating me to the draw.’
‘Arend?’ questioned the Prof
‘Who else. Greedy fairy boy that he is.’
‘Listen, Grannus,’ interjected Latobias. ‘We need a favor.’
‘Talk. Be quick. Places to go, fairies to kill.’
‘We need some gold and jewels.’
‘How much?’
Latobias told him.
‘That is a lavatory full. What you doing, buying a country?’
‘An airship,’ replied Latobias.
‘Oh, dwarves,’ acknowledged Grannus. ‘Greedy little sods. Sure, no problem. Stand back.’
There was a sound akin to a thousand cash registers ringing at once and a fountain of gold coins and brilliant cut diamonds poured through the portal. A veritable tsunami of wealth.
‘Done,’ grunted Grannus. ‘Now, goodbye. And stop bothering me, I have a job, you know.’
Latobias closed the portal, turned to the Master and gestured. ‘I believe this should cover the cost.’

The dwarves' reactions were priceless. Well almost. Not priceless but damned expensive.
Finally, Mine Master Cavebender managed to find his voice.
'That will do nicely, my lord,' he breathed. 'Now, if you would please follow me.'

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CHAPTER 12

‘Behold,’ intoned the Air Master. ‘The Skyhold, Mark 7.’
Emily stared up at the airship, her eyes wide in wonder. It was a truly magnificent sight.
The airbag, or envelope as it is correctly called, measured approximately five hundred feet in length. Unlike the modern-day Zeppelin, the envelope was bulker. Less cigar shape and more watermelon. This increased the internal area, which was necessary as the lift was provided by hot air as opposed to hydrogen.
Two separate gondolas hung beneath the envelope, joined by an open wooden catwalk.
The Air Master, a dwarf they had only just met, pointed out various features to the team of hunters.
‘The forward gondola is the bridge and the crew area,’ he informed them. ‘Cabins, pilot room, mess hall, ablutions, weapons storage and such. The rear gondola houses the fire boxes and steam engines. We use heat to gain lift and steam to power the rotors and the weapons.
‘Coal is the preferred fuel, and it is automatically stoked according to the instructions fed from the pilot. Come, let us go aboard and I can give you the full tour.
‘Before we board, any questions?’
Tag held his hand up.
‘Yes?’
‘How come you don’t talk weird like the other dudes?’
The Air Master chuckled. ‘Because unlike those who are mired in tradition and custom, I have to be a little more forward thinking. After all, if I make a mistake on the job, people tend to fall out of the sky. Which usually results in death. So, I don’t have time for hyperbaton, far too busy getting things right.’
‘Hyper-what?’ blurted Tag.
‘Hyperbaton,’ interjected Emily. ‘Syntax that shows a favoring of Object-Subject-Verb as opposed to the usual Subject-Verb-Object we all use.’
Troy grinned. ‘Nerd,’ he mumbled under his breath.
Emily stuck her tongue out at him.
Tag frowned. Then he shrugged. ‘Whatever. I understood some of the words you guys were saying, but the meaning sorta escapes me. Anyways, let’s go take a look at the boat.’
The team followed the Air master, climbing the chain ladder that hung

from the side of the forward gondola.
The Master took them through the various parts of the ship. When he started to explain the technical side of the piloting aspect, Latobias simply held up a hand to stop him.
‘Thank you, but there is no need to explain, Air Master. I am a proficient pilot.’
The Master nodded, then led them through the next part of his tour.
The gunnery turrets were viewed with particular excitement by the Legionnaires. There were five manned turrets. One fore, one aft, one port, one starboard and the final one attached to the belly of the gondola.
In addition, there was a single remote-controlled turret on the top of the airship’s envelope. This was controlled via a system of gears and pulleys and, although not very accurate, it did give some measure of defense to the vulnerable topside of the airship.
The Air Master opened the hatch to the aft turret, allowing all to see inside.
The interior looked like an explosion in a mad scientist’s laboratory. A leather chair sat atop of a rotating platform. To the sides, underneath and on top of which were yards of polished copper tubes and boxes. These all conjoined at the top of what appeared to be a huge version of Missus Jones. A multi-barreled monster gun. Upon closer inspection, Quinton noted it was indeed some sort of gatling gun. Five barrels, each with a bore of around an inch. A hopper above looked like it fed the weapon with solid lead balls.
‘Where is the charge?’ he asked the Master.
‘Sorry,’ responded the Air Master. ‘Charge?’
‘The boom,’ said Quinton. The thing that makes the balls shoot out.’
The Master nodded. ‘Here,’ he pointed at a pair of pipes. ‘Superheated steam.’
‘I see, so the pressure builds up in the reservoir and then when released it propels the slug.’
The Master shook his head. ‘No. That wouldn’t work. The steam drives a series of gears. Those in turn spin this disc here,’ he pointed. ‘And as the balls fall from the hopper, the spinning disc flings it out through the barrel. Far safer than expelling superheated steam all over the place.’
Quinton raised an eyebrow. ‘What sort of velocity does it produce?’
‘Around three hundred yards per second.’
‘Impressive. Accuracy?’
The Master smiled. ‘Deplorable. It’s definitely a spray and pray weapon. But it’s better than a crossbow and you don’t need to be a mage to operate it.’
Quinton grinned back. ‘I like it.’

Tag shook his head. ‘See that, missus Jones,’ he mumbled to his minigun. ‘It’s a Jurassic version of you.’
Finally, the Master took them through to the second gondola, leading them along a series of gantries to gain access.
It was basically an engine room. Two massive boilers, a water reservoir and a huge coal hopper to supply the fires. The entire system was semi-automated. Controlled by a system of gears and pulleys that were operated from the bridge.
‘Where the kitchen at?’ asked Tag.
‘We passed it on our way,’ answered the Master. ‘Just behind the bridge, before the crews’ quarters.’
‘Does it have any stew?’
The Master shook his head. ‘There are no supplies as yet. However, that can be remedied. For an additional cost, obviously.’
‘Obviously,’ agreed Merlin with a sigh.

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CHAPTER 13

Arend stepped through the portal and into the entrance hall, followed closely by both Mist and Remer.

He had experienced a great run of luck lately. A good tip from the cyber-twins had led him to a bank vault in Austin, Texas. There he had relived the rightful owners of another part of the *Triginta*.

A single coin.

Now the Blood King had eleven of the thirty pieces.

And very soon it would be twelve.

Because one of Hadad's avenues of investigation had come up with a solid lead. A French nobleman who collected Roman artifacts. Particularly anything to do with the twelve Caesars.

And obviously, when casting such a wide net, one gathered up many extraneous pieces that did not pertain directly to their collection.

One of these was a Roman sestertius circa AD 27 to 36. After additional enquiries, Hadad had confirmed the likelihood that it was one of the thirty pieces.

The French Duke kept most of his collection in a series of strongrooms in a penthouse apartment in Paris. A massive dwelling that occupied the top three floors of a residential block that overlooked the *Pont de'lena* bridge and the Eiffel Tower.

And Arend and his squad were there to relieve the duke of his treasure. Or at least one tiny part of it.

'Right, let's find someone and get them to show us to the vaults,' stated Arend as he strode down the entrance hall, towards the main living area of the penthouse.

He could hear the sounds of polite chatter coming from one of the reception rooms. It sounded like some sort of social gathering. Not loud enough to be a party, but most likely a dinner engagement, or perhaps simply drinks and schmoozing.

The trio of *Hulder* burst into the reception room. It was indeed a small gathering of people sipping on cocktails, snacking on trays of bite sized morsels being offered by uniformed waiting staff, and talking in French.

Arend wasted no time in attracting their attention. He conjured up a crackling ball of lightning and flung it at an ugly modern art sculpture of a mother and child. The stone *objet d'art* exploded into dust as the charge struck it.

The polite chatter immediately dissolved into a mix of stunned silence

and piercing screams.
Except for one man. Tall, slim, immaculately dressed and impeccably groomed. He stepped forward. '*Quel est le sens de cette intrusion?*' he asked Arend.
'English,' snapped the head Hulder. 'I haven't bothered to purchase a universal translation stone.'
'How did you get in?' enquired the Frenchman.
'Portal. My turn, who are you?'
'I am the duke Richelieu, and this is my residence. I must insist you leave at once, and take your portal with you.'
'Sorry, duke,' replied Arend. 'No can do. Now, tell me, who are these other people? Family, guests, social climbers and spongers?'
'Friends,' replied the duke, his manner hesitant as he realized that, try as he might, he was unable to remain in charge of the conversation.
'Ah, so nobody really,' said Arend as he turned to Mist and Remer. 'Subdue the duke's guests,' he commanded. 'I have no use for them.'
'Can we kill them?' asked Remer with a grin.
'If you want,' sighed Arend. 'But not quite yet. Wait until I tell you, and then be quick, and for the sake of the gods, be quiet.'
'So, no torturing then?' asked Mist.
Arend didn't bother to answer as he returned his attention to the duke, who was now a funereal shade of pale, befitting a man who's evening *soirée* had just turned into a psychopath's buffet.
'Talk to me, duke,' commanded Arend. 'I need to see your collection. Specifically, a silver sestertius, most likely circa AD 27 to 36.'
The duke shook his head. 'I have many sestertii,' he said. 'It would be impossible to find any specific one.'
'Oh, I think you will be surprised,' returned Arend. 'Do you keep all of them together?'
The duke nodded.
'Take me to them.'
The duke hesitated and then shook his head. 'No. Once again, I must ask you to leave.'
Arend laughed. 'Oh, I see. You are calling my bluff. Or what you perceive to be a bluff.'
The duke stood firm. His expression imperious. 'I will not bow to your threats.'
Arend chuckled again. 'Good man. I admire your spirit. Remer,' he called.
'Master?'
'Bring one of the guests here. A woman, preferably.'
There was a squeal of anger and Remer walked up, literally dragging a woman by her hair.
'Pick her up,' said Arend.

Remer obeyed, lifting her to her feet.
'Explode her head,' commanded Arend.
Remer didn't hesitate. Not even for a fraction of a second.
There was a wet thud. A cross between a bursting party balloon and a watermelon being dropped from a height onto a concrete sidewalk.
The walls, floor and ceiling were instantly covered in a fine coating of blood and brain matter.
As was Arend, Remer and the duke.
'Idiot,' shouted Arend.
'But you said…' retaliated Remer.
'Yes, I know. But you could at least have contained the gore within a protective sphere. This was a new suit, you ignoramus.' Arend spat on the floor. 'Yuk, I think I got some of her in my mouth.' He leaned forward and cuffed Remer on the side of his head.
'The gods wept,' snapped Arend. 'Oh well, you've started now, might as well kill the rest of the.'
The duke, who had been standing stock still for the last few seconds, bent over and threw up.
Arend jumped back, but not quite quick enough to avoid getting vomitus on his shoes.
'Oh, come on,' he yelled. 'These were also new. Hand crafted in Jermyn Street, London. Can't a *Hulder* catch a break?'
He wiped his shoes off on the woman's headless corpse. Then he grabbed the duke by the collar. 'Come along, bilious boy,' he snapped. 'Time to show uncle Arend the *Triginta*.'
'Huh?'
'The sestertius,' Arend explained.
The duke nodded, his previous streak of rebellion now a mile wide ribbon of compliance. He led the way, each step dragging, like a man making his way to the guillotine.
Dead man walking.
They proceeded down a series of corridors, eventually stopping at a steel door. Next to the door was a glass pad and an optical scanner. The duke placed his right palm on the pad and looked into the lens.
Seconds later, the lock disengaged and the door swung open with a hiss of hydraulics.
Arend pushed the duke inside. 'Hurry now,' he urged. 'Things to do, don't you know?'
The duke led the *Hulder* past various display cases, heading towards the back of the room. But before he got there, Arend could already feel the power. A low throb, like a ships motor. He pushed past the Frenchman and walked over to a chest of drawers. Without asking the duke, he opened the third drawer down, flicked through a set of plastic envelopes, and withdrew the coin.

‘There,’ he exclaimed. ‘Got you.’
He slipped the envelope into his jacket pocket.
‘How… What is the difference?’ asked the duke.
‘You can’t feel it?’ responded Arend.
The duke shook his head.
Arend raised an eyebrow. ‘Strange.’ Then he ignored the French nobleman and proceeded back towards the entrance hall.
He sensed more than heard a movement behind him, and at the same time he picked up on the duke’s intent. Dropping to one knee, the *Hulder* mage threw up a shield and spun around.
The lead slugs ricocheted off the shield as the duke opened up with his small pistol. A Walther PPK. Great for James Bond, but against a *Hulder* battle mage – not so much. Seven rounds of .32 ACP, and then the slide racked open.
Arend shook his head. ‘Now why did you have to go and do that?’ he asked, genuinely puzzled. ‘Hell, it was only a single sestertius. Can’t be worth more than a few thousand dollars.’
‘You killed Jaqueline,’ yelled the duke. ‘You deconstructed her head.’
‘Yes,’ agreed Arend. ‘But in all fairness, I did warn you.’
‘*Tu m'emmerdes, putain*,’ cussed the duke as he ejected the empty magazine and fumbled for a fresh on in his pocket.
‘No, don’t,’ urged Arend. ‘Calm down.’
‘Die, asshole,’ yelled the duke as he slammed the magazine home.
Arend whipped up a crackling ball of lightning that he threw at the Frenchman. The ball of plasma struck him in the chest, burning through his flesh and ribs and exiting out of his back to slam into one of the exhibits.
‘Damned humans,’ grunted Arend. ‘So impossibly emotional.’
He spun on his heel and continued back to his two compatriots. When he entered the reception room, he saw that Mist and Remer had gone to town. The remains of the human guests were scattered liberally about the room. Limbs, torsos, glistening entrails and sundry blobby bits.
Arend turned up his lip in disgust. ‘What a mess,’ he noted. ‘You two are incorrigible. Come on, let’s go home.’
As he spoke, there was a flash of light, and a portal opened in front of them.
As they looked on in bafflement, a short, incredibly wide man stepped out.
He was dressed in jeans, a leather waistcoat – and more Bling than an audience at a rap concert.
He held his hand out towards Arend. ‘Give it to me,’ he demanded, his voice rolling like thunder.
Arend didn’t waste time with denials and questions. This being was

obviously after the *Triginta*.
The trio of trained battle mages reacted instantly, hitting the newcomer with a combination of fireballs and lightning.
They might as well have thrown rose petals at him.
The wide man frowned, clenched his fist, and struck Remer in the chest.
The blow smashed the *Hulder's* rib cage, ripping through his torso and pulverizing his spine.
Remer dropped to the floor, twitched a few times and lay still.
Arend, using Remer's death as a distraction, spun up a quick portal and dragged Mist through it, slamming it closed behind him.
Then, just in case, he opened another, moving them again. And again.
Theoretically, it was impossible to track someone through a portal. But then it was also theoretically impossible to shrug off three attack spells like the proverbial water off a duck's back.
So, rather safe than sorry.
'He killed Remer,' shrieked Mist.
'Oh, you think?' responded Arend.
Mist stared at her master.
'What?' he asked. 'Am I supposed to get all teary-eyed? Remer was an asshole. Things happen. Upwards and onwards.'
Mist shrugged her acceptance. 'True,' she admitted. 'He was an asshole. But he was our asshole.'
'There is that,' concurred Arend. 'But the worse part of this is, now we have psychotic, Bling-monster chasing us. I wonder who the hell he is?'

***

Grannus stared at the gore encrusted room, his expression betraying his confusion.
The fact that the bodies had been turned into meatloaf preparation couldn't hide the fact there had been at least seventeen people in the room earlier that evening.
Seventeen breathing, laughing, talking human beings.
With families.
And friends.
The barbarity of their indiscriminate murder shocked the god of Bling to his core. Even for the *Hulder*, this was over the top.
Evil.
He kicked Remer's corpse as he walked past him, heading for the strongroom. Although he knew he was too late.
But now it was personal. He was no longer merely hunting for the *Triginta*.
He was also hunting for the *Hulder* that had perpetrated this atrocity.

Because he was the god of Bling, and he didn't take no crap from non-humans.

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CHAPTER 14

‘Why are we traveling at normal speed?’ asked Tag.
Latobias glanced up from the controls, a series of brass wheels and levers that leaked steam and buzzed with static electricity. ‘What do you mean?’
‘I mean, like, you can get anywhere in ten minutes, right?’
‘Correct,’ confirmed Latobias.
‘So why we puttering along at…’
‘Fifty-two knots.’
‘What’s that in real money?’ questioned Tag.
‘Sixty miles an hour.’
‘Yeah. Why?’
‘Where would you like to go?’ enquired Latobias.
‘I dunno,’ admitted Tag. ‘Wherever the Orcs are. Then we can kick some butt. Or where the goblins is. To do the same.’
‘And where are they?’
Tag shrugged. ‘Dunno.’
‘Exactly,’ responded the Celtic god. ‘So, until we know, we putter around, as you put it, looking for any sign of them.’
Tag nodded. ‘Okay, I get it.’
‘Anyway,’ continued Latobias. ‘I enjoy actually piloting a craft sometimes, as opposed to simply imposing my will on it. It’s relaxing.’
‘Cool,’ said Tag. ‘Enjoy away. I’m going to the kitchen to see if there’s any stew.’
Tag turned to leave, but as he got to the exit, he turned. ‘I think I miss Rork,’ he said, a slightly puzzled expression on his face.
‘The horse?’ responded Emily.
‘Yeah. Not sure why, all he brought me was pain.’
‘Perhaps you two bonded more than you thought,’ offered Emily.
The big man shook his head. ‘Tag don’t bond with nothing that hurts his butt like that horse did. Still – yep, I miss him. Rork.’
Without further exposition, he walked off.
Latobias watched the big man leave and grinned.
‘Remarkable, isn’t he,’ observed the Prof ‘Here we are, in an airship, in a foreign dimension, and he has somehow managed to reduce it all to a question of kicking butt, puttering around, eating stew and missing his erstwhile equine companion.’
Latobias nodded his agreement. ‘His capacity to reduce life to its component parts has an almost Zen-like quality,’ he admitted. ‘He

simplifies existence to a point where, no matter what is happening, it is manageable.'
The Prof nodded.
Emily, who had been observing from the sidelines, raised an eyebrow. 'Never assume Tag is a simple man,' she said. 'He is far from it.'
'On the contrary,' responded Latobias. 'He is one of the most complex beings I have ever met.'
'Me too,' admitted the Prof
Emily smiled. 'But he does like stew,' she added.
The three of them chuckled.
'Where are we heading?' she asked Latobias.
'I thought we would go back to the village of Strander. See what's going on there.'
'It's as good a plan as any,' admitted Emily.
The two of them stood in silence for a while, taking in the snow-covered forest and mountains below. It was a vista of stark and savage beauty.
The Prof muttered to himself in the background. Emily picked up the odd word. *Vector*. *Velocity*. *Area of destruction*. But she didn't really bother to listen closely. As it was, she seldom understood the Prof's ramblings, so why bother trying?
Their reverie was interrupted by Quinton as he strode onto the bridge. 'Emily, Latobias,' he greeted.
'What up?' asked Emily.
'Got my men manning the guns,' replied the commandant. 'They're pretty simple to operate. However, I would appreciate a live fire exercise. Let them get the feel for the weapons range and so forth.'
'Target practice,' confirmed Latobias.
'Yes,' agreed Quinton. 'A large tree. Big rock. Anything like that.'
Latobias pointed at a clump of firs in the near distance. 'What about those.'
'Perfect,' replied Quinton. 'Let me just run around and tell the boys.'
'No need,' interjected Latobias, as he grabbed a brass horn. The horn was attached to a flexible tube that disappeared into the wall. 'Talk into this.' Then he pointed at a series of small levers. Flick them all up to talk to all of them at once.'
Quinton took the horn and frowned. 'How does it work?' he asked. 'Just talking into this, there is no way the sound is going to travel to the rear of the ship.'
Latobias chuckled. 'You'll be surprised,' he said. 'You humans have been using them on battleships for centuries. Trust me, a well-constructed, insulated voice pipe can transfer your audible instructions for many hundreds of feet. Try it.'
Quinton held the horn to his mouth. 'Attention, gunners,' he called.

There was a slight pause and then all of them responded at once.
'Commandant, est-ce que vous?'
'Quelle? Qui? Comment?'
'Hello. Commandant, where are you?'
'*Sainte merde.* Who said that?'
'Silence,' bellowed Quinton. 'I am talking to you via a voice tube situated on the bridge. You will answer when called upon. Otherwise, shut up and listen. Understood?'
'*Entendu*,' they responded as one. 'Understood.'
'If you look for'ard, you will see a copse of fir trees. At one o'clock, some three miles off the starboard bow. Stefan, don't bother trying to see them, as rear gunner you will have to wait your turn.'
A ghostly chuckle floated back up the tube.
'As we approach approximately one mile from target,' continued Quinton. 'I want the gunners who have sight to start firing. Keep up intermittent volleys until you begin to strike target. Then open up. Copy.'
'Copy,' returned the Legionnaires.
'Then, Stefan, as we fly past, it's your turn. Give it stick until we are out of range. I want to see how these babies perform. Ready?'
'*Prêt à partir*,' the men responded. 'Ready to go.'
The two massive steam powered turbines drove the craft forward at just over sixty miles an hour, bringing the gunners within the one-mile mark in under two minutes. As they opened up with short intermittent bursts, Emily could feel a slight vibration transmit itself to her feet, via the ships rigid frame.
It was easy to pick up the fall of the lead shot as it struck the ground, kicking up fountains of snow. The rounds were falling around seven or eight hundred yards short of the trees.
The airship thrummed onwards, every few seconds or so, one of the gunners would squirt a short burst at the target. The fountains of snow grew closer and closer. After thirty seconds, the first rounds fell amongst the trees.
All the gunners opened up at once.
Quinton let out a long, low whistle.
Emily was likewise impressed. Tree trucks shattered and boughs were chopped off as thousands of heavy lead balls struck the target area.
Even though the velocity of the steam-guns wasn't near to any human military weapons, the mere fact that the actual slugs were so heavy meant they imparted massive amounts of damage when they struck.
It's like the difference between being hit by a fast golf ball or a slow bowling ball.
But there was a problem.
The attack was more akin to Second World War carpet bombing than

modern day laser guided ordnance. The accuracy was truly appalling. Around half of the shot fell in and around the immediate area of the copse of trees, but the other half peppered the surrounds with the abandon of a child throwing rice at a wedding.
Some of the lead balls even managed to strike a cliff side some eight hundred yards off target.
'Tighten up that grouping,' yelled Quintin into the speaking tube.
A chorus of French cusses came floating back. Nothing personally against the commandant, merely a group of soldiers trying to obey orders.
Finally, one yelled back. 'We're trying as hard as we can, sir. These things are not like anything we have ever fired before. It's impossible to keep it on target. The weapon shudders and bounces around like an epileptic Orangutang. Also, my weapon is already badly overheating.'
'The dwarven steam throwers are notorious for their inaccuracy,' interjected the Prof 'As the Air Master informed you. To achieve the necessary velocity, the sheer amount of steam and centrifugal power involved makes it impossible to bolt the weapon down. If you did, it would simply tear itself apart. Thus, they have to mount it on springs that absorb the recoil and the vibrations. Your men will never be able to fully control it. As well as that, the use of superheated steam means they overheat extremely quickly.'
'Slightly disappointed,' admitted Quinton. 'I was expecting a little more accuracy than that. Oh well, I'm just going to have to accept it's area effect weapon, not a surgical strike.'
The airship shuddered again as it passed over the target and the rear gunner opened fire.
Quinton gave him a couple of minutes then he called down the tube for everyone to stop firing and see to their weapons. 'I want them gleaming,' he instructed them. 'Better than new.'
Then he left, off to inspect his men were doing as commanded.
'Impressive fire power,' noted Emily.
Latobias shrugged. 'I suppose so. Not compared to that monster Tag carries around.'
Emily shushed him. 'Hey, don't let him hear you calling missus Jones a monster. You'll upset him.'
The Prof chuckled. 'Like I said, a strange man that Tag.'
The ship continued to plow through the frigid mountain air, shouldering the firmament aside with its vast propellers and massive steam engines.
Three hours and a couple of hundred miles later, they were approaching the newly goblin occupied village of Strander.
The bridge was crowded as Quinton, Troy, Emily, Tag, Muller, Merlin, the Prof and the other two gods were all crammed in, peering down

through the large viewing windows.
'Lot of goblins,' said Troy. 'Look,' he pointed at the east side of the village. 'They're expanding. Looks like more houses.'
'Adding to the walls as well,' noted Quinton. 'See the trenches? Looks like they plan on tripling the size of the village and upgrading the defensive capabilities while they're at it.'
'Yes,' agreed Merlin. 'This is definitely not some random land grab. It's the beginning of a concerted campaign. Unless the Queen puts a stop to this rather smartly, I think we will be looking at a war.'
'Why don't we put a stop to it?' questioned Tag. 'We got the weapons. Let's just hose the place down with lead, drop a few fireballs on them and go home in time for tea.'
'Take a closer look,' interjected Emily.
Tag squinted. 'What? All I see is loads of little green skinned dudes.'
Emily didn't react, waiting for the big man to see what she had seen.
Tag continued to stare at the village, not sure what Emily was harping on about. It was just a bunch of goblins. Male warriors with spears and shields, laborers with picks and shovels, females with children in tow…
'Oh, crap,' he said. 'Families. Civilians. Little kiddie goblins. What do you call kiddie goblins?'
'No idea,' answered Emily. 'But we can't rain hell down on innocents. We don't do that.'
'Obviously,' concurred the big man. 'What can we do then? I mean, they did attack us, so they's not our friends. And the Winter Queen is gonna blame us for whatever happens, so we gotta do something.'
'It's beyond our current remit,' said Merlin. 'I think our priority should be tracking down the Morrigan and putting an end to her evil schemes. Who knows, perhaps that might even defuse the situation. Probably not, but we can hope.'
'How low can you fly this thing?' Troy asked Latobias.
'Maybe a hundred foot,' he replied. 'Any lower and we could hit a tree, wind sheer might push us into a mountainside. Even that is too low for comfort, so I wouldn't recommend cruising at that altitude for any length of time. I can take it right down if you need to get off. Why?'
'I was hoping we could track the Orcs from the air,' answered Troy. 'But it looks like we're going to have to get a team on the ground.'
'Thanks for volunteering,' said Merlin. 'Who else do you need?'
Troy scowled at the wizard, but didn't gainsay him. He knew he was the best tracker, except maybe for Emily.
'I'll come with,' said Emily. 'The two of us should be able to do it. Especially if we both go wolf, then we can keep moving much faster.'
'I can't let you go down there without protection,' interjected Quinton.

‘At least myself and three other Legionnaires.’
Emily chuckled. ‘Seriously? You guys are worse than Tag.’
Quinton raised a quizzical eyebrow.
‘Tag used to be my bodyguard back in the day,’ explained Emily. ‘He wouldn’t let me do anything if he wasn’t around to protect me.’
Tag nodded. ‘True that. But I learned a while back, you don’t actually always need protecting, on account of being a bad-ass yourself. But sometimes you still do. And trust me, girl, when that sometime comes, Tag will be there.’
‘I’m not happy letting you go down without the Legion,’ insisted Quinton.
‘And that is very sweet of you,’ said Emily. ‘But let me ask you something, how fast can you and your guys run a mile?’
Quinton shrugged. ‘Through this snow. Maybe five minutes, maybe a bit more.’
‘Well, when Troy and I go wolf,’ said Emily. ‘We travel through the snow at around two minutes per mile. And we can do that all day. Unless we need to go faster, then we can literally triple that pace.’
‘Like I said,’ interjected Tag. ‘She’s a bad ass.’
‘Settled then,’ said Merlin. ‘When can you start?’
‘Now,’ answered Troy and Emily nodded her agreement.
‘Latobias, can you take us low enough to drop them off?’ asked Merlin.
The god nodded and pitched the craft forward, steering it closer to the ground.
Emily and Troy went to the exit at the back of the bridge, awaited until they were fifty feet above the ground and then simply leaped out, changing as they did.
A second later, the two massive wolves loped off in a northerly direction, noses down and running hard.
Hunting for Orcs.
The hunter watched them run for a while, then Tag said.
‘Maybe the kids are called, Goblets. Goblinoids? Goblings? Come on, guys, help me out here.’

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Orc sergeant Ugrill took a knee, keeping his eyes averted as was the custom when addressing a superior. He had ridden hard for over ten hours, changing his battle-boar mount whenever he came across an outpost or another patrol. Driving his mounts until they were blown.
The final boar had staggered into the encampment a mere few minutes ago, dropping dead from exhaustion as Ugrill dismounted and lurched to the tent that housed the Morrigan and her compatriot, the one-eyed god.

‘Talk, sergeant,’ commanded the goddess of war.
Ugrill took a shuddering breath before he spoke, desperately trying to slow his hammering heart. ‘Mistress,’ he started. ‘Ugrill have news.’
‘Obviously, you cretin,’ snapped the Morrigan. ‘Out with it.’
‘The hunters you had us watch for. I saw them.’
‘And?’
‘They have big airship. Big, huge airship with steam guns. Big.’
‘Yes, big, you already said that.’
‘Yes,’ agreed the Orc. ‘Very big.’
‘That is disturbing news,’ grunted Balor. ‘I have seen the firepower those vessels can unleash. It’s quite impressive. Plus, the fact they can sit out of range of our crossbows and hammer us at will.’
The Morrigan sat still for a while, thinking. Then she smiled.
‘Sergeant, fetch chief Kaal. Tell him to come quickly. Then rest, you have done well.’
Ugrill stood and bowed, then he walked backwards from the tent, bowing as he did so.
‘What?’ asked Balor.
‘We need to put together a war party,’ answered the Morrigan. ‘It’s time to hit another village.’
‘Why?’ asked Balor. ‘They have already taken the bait. They come for us, so what is the point? And quite frankly, killing all those Fae villagers is boring.’
‘We’re not going to kill these ones,’ replied the Morrigan. ‘At least not straight away.’
‘Care to enlighten me?’
‘We need to negate the hunter’s ranged weapons. And I know just how to do it. We intersperse our troops with villagers. Preferably women and children. A human shield. I know those soft-hearted idiots. There is no way they will fire on children. They will be forced to take us on man-to-man. Or Orc.’
Balor shrugged. ‘Good plan, I suppose.’
‘You suppose?’ snapped the Morrigan. ‘It’s bloody brilliant. Now let’s get to it.’

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CHAPTER 15

The throne room stank of blood.
And worse.
Naked bodies were piled high, scattered about the room like cordwood. Throats torn open, limbs ripped off, torsos covered in claw marks.
Many of the corpses were those of young children.
Jebe noted the expressions of absolute terror on their faces. Etched there by death's permanent hand.
Jebe had seen this type of wanton destruction before. This savage defilement of the living.
He had seen it when he rode with Genghis Kahn.
He had seen it during the Spanish inquisition.
In the Nazi extermination camps during the Second World War.
And he understood it for what it was.
A certain type of insanity.
'It is the *Triginta*.'
Jebe spun around to see Hadad standing behind him, one eyebrow raised, a bland expression on his ruined, tumor ridden face.
'How… I didn't hear you come in.'
Hadad shrugged. 'I walk softly.' He gestured towards the surrounding death. 'How often is he doing this?'
'Four or five times a week,' answered Jebe. 'It is his right. They are just food. Cattle. And he is the *Krov Tsar*, the Blood King.'
Hadad nodded. 'Tell me, Jebe, you rode with the Mongols. Did they have cattle?'
'Of course. Our herds were vast. And we added to them every time we conquered another area.'
'And how often did the *Great Kahn* torture them, take one bite from each, if that, tear them limb from limb and then kill them?'
'Never, why would he?'
'He was the greatest leader that ever lived. He commanded over twelve million square miles. Ruled over millions of people, surely it was his right to do so? Why did he not?'
Jebe stared at the scholar. 'Your words verge on treason,' he said quietly.
'No,' denied Hadad. 'I am merely questioning.' Once again, he gestured at the bodies. 'We have seen this happen before. It is not right. It always leads to ruin.'

‘Watch your mouth, Arab,’ snapped Jebe.
Hadad looked disappointed. ‘Really, Jebe Zurgadai. You would stoop to petty insults and racial slurs, whilst Rome burns around you.’
Jebe looked embarrassed. But he would not back down. ‘He is my king. As he is yours.’
‘I do not deny that,’ concurred Hadad. ‘As I do not deny him the right to slaughter whomever and whatever he sees fit. I am merely pointing out the possible effects of the *Triginta*. It is cursed, and I fear its poison will infect us all.’
‘Enough,’ responded Jebe, his voice barely above a whisper. ‘You will say no more on this subject. You have been warned. If you continue to cast doubt on the *Krov Tsar,* I will be forced to kill you.’
Hadad shook his head. ‘No, old friend,’ he replied. ‘You will be forced to try.’
He turned and walked away, leaving Jebe with the room full of lifeless human flesh.

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CHAPTER 16

Troy and Emily climbed up the chain ladder and back into the airship.
'Twenty miles, that way,' said Troy as soon as they joined the rest of the team. 'Behind that mountain.'
'Looks like there are at least three hundred Orc warriors,' added Emily. 'Maybe more.'
'Defenses?' questioned Quinton.
Emily shook her head. 'No, just a tent encampment. Not even ditches or stakes. Groups of sentries patrolling the perimeter, but that's all.'
'Any ranged weapons?' asked Merlin.
Troy shook his head.
'Cool,' said Tag. 'So, all we need to do is fly over, line them up and let the steam guns do the talking. Turn them into hamburger and go home.'
The wolfman shook his head. 'No can do.'
'Why?' asked Tag.
'Human shields,' responded Emily. 'They've seeded the entire place with Fae civilians. Men, women, children. Chained to stakes and scattered throughout the camp.'
'Despicable,' snapped Muller.
'Yes,' agreed Merlin. 'But clever. It forces us to close on foot. Nullifies the advantage our steam weapons gave us.'
'We still have ranged weapons,' interjected Quinton. 'My boys, plus Emily, Troy, Tag and Muller can get up on the ridge overlooking the camp and start sniping at them. Then when they come for us, we can either engage, or the ship can pick us up and we redeploy further out.'
'Gear up,' said Merlin. 'Let's do that. Not sure it's the best of plans, but as none of us seem to be able to think of anything better, that's it.'
The team armed themselves with assault rifles and Latobias dropped them on the back of the mountain, using it to cover his approach. They then made their way to prescribed positions, perhaps halfway down the other side of the mountain, overlooking the Orcs.
Being armed with the French FAMAS assault rifles meant they had to get within three hundred yards of their targets. Because, although the rifle was fit for purpose, it was not designed as a sniper rifle.
That didn't bother any of them, as three hundred yards is way beyond the range of even the most powerful crossbow. And Merlin had assured them, even if the Morrigan used magical attacks, it was difficult to project a fireball accurately at that distance.

Tag had insisted on bringing missus Jones as well. Because he maintained that needing her and not having her was far worse than not needing her and carrying her around unnecessarily. As he was the one humping her around, no one argued.

The team split into seven pairs. It took them just under half an hour to assume their positions and ready for fire. They had sectioned the camp into seven separate areas, one for each pair, and had agreed Emily would take the first shot. After that, it was fire at will.

She selected her target, breathed out and squeezed.

The slug plucked at the Orc officer's leather jerkin, missing and kicking up a feather of snow behind him. He turned to look at it, baffled as to what could have caused the impact.

Emily adjusted, and fired again.

Direct hit, center mass.

The Orc staggered backwards, dropped to one knee and then keeled over.

The rest of the team opened up.

The Orcish troops had no idea what was happening as the accurate rifle fire began to decimate their ranks. Even though the team of hunters were operating at close to the maximum effective range of the FAMAS rifle, most of their shots were striking their intended targets.

The sounds of rifle fire echoed between the surrounding mountains, further confusing the Orcs as to where this strange form of instant death was coming from. Some randomly fired their crossbows, not sure what they were firing at, merely trying to respond in some way that might prevent whatever was happening.

Finally, the Morrigan began to rally them.

'Stop running around like a flock of turkeys,' she yelled.

'What foul magic is this?' bellowed one of her commanders.

'It isn't magic,' returned the Morrigan. 'It's human weaponry. All officers, to me.'

Orc officers started to rally to her cry, running through the snow to report as told.

As they ran, some more were cut down.

And all around the slaughter continued.

'Right,' shouted the Morrigan as soon as she deemed enough officers were standing in front of her. 'Spread out, and for every Orc that gets taken down, cut the throat of two humans. Preferably women or children. Quickly, do it now.'

Balor gave her a quizzical look.

'As soon as the humans see their attack is resulting in the death of innocents,' she explained. 'They will stop, none of them have the strength of will or character to cross that boundary. Then they shall be forced to withdraw, or engage. Whichever they do, it is good for us. If

they run, we follow. If they attack, we slaughter them. Tell your Fomorians to be prepared.'
Emily drew a bead on her next target and fired. She watched as the Orc went down. Then out of the corner of her eye, she saw another Orc grab a child by his shirt, pull him close, and with a leer, he slit his throat. Then he took two steps forward and did the same to the child's mother.
Anger blossomed within her. Lining up the offending Orc in her sights, she took him down.
But once again, another Orc rushed over and dispatched a further two civilians.
She heard Troy bellow out a command. 'Stop firing. Stop. They're killing the civvies.'
The onslaught stuttered to a halt.
'Emily.' Merlin's voice echoed in her head as he contacted her via his mental link. 'Why have you all stopped shooting?'
'They're killing the hostages,' explained Emily. 'Every time we kill one of the Orcs, they kill two civilians.'
'Bloody Morrigan,' snapped Merlin.
'What can we do?' asked Emily, seeking advice.
'Nothing,' admitted the wizard. 'She is ruthless. Death of an innocent means nothing to her. She will order them to kill every Fae villager, and their blood will be on our hands.'
Quinton came running over. 'We must attack,' he urged Emily.
She shook her head. 'How many villagers do you estimate there are?'
The commandant shrugged. 'At a guess, maybe two hundred.'
'If we attack, they will all die'
Quinton frowned. 'Maybe not all,' he urged. 'It is war. Innocents die in war. In every one I have fought in, it happens. It is sad, but sometimes necessary. If we do not push the attack and take them out now, those villagers will most likely be killed at any rate. And then when the Orcs attack another village, more will die.
'We should end it now.'
'I will not allow women and children to be massacred,' returned Emily.
'We are at war,' insisted Quinton. 'And with all due respect, you may be the best Shadowhunter and vampire killer in the world, but I am amongst the best at what I do. And what I do, is war. In all its ugliness and unfairness and horrific guises.
'And sometimes, Emily, you have to sacrifice the few to save the many. Yes, the death of these poor villagers will hang heavy over our hearts. This I know. But by not attacking, we know they will die anyway, and for what?
'By not taking out the Orcs and that insane Morrigan, all we are doing

is avoiding the hard place. The dirty decisions. And we do not have the luxury of doing that. It is our cross to bear.
'Now, I have said my piece. Whatever you command us to do, we shall obey.'
Emily looked to the Orc encampment. They weren't making any move to attack the hunters. Obviously having decided it was safer to hide behind their wall of innocents instead.
She looked at Troy.
He shook his head. 'I cannot help,' he said softly. 'Wolves have no civilians. Every member of the pack is a warrior, a hunter, a father and a mother. A cub. You know, if the situation were reversed, we would have fought the Orcs to the death, every last pack member.'
Tag and Muller came jogging over, leading the rest of the Legionnaires.
'Hey,' said Tag. 'What we doing? The longer we do nothing, the longer the bad guys have got to make a plan. We gotta attack or get the hell outa here.'
'Latobias,' pulsed Emily. 'Can you hear me?'
'Of course.'
'Can you transport the Fae civilians out of the target zone?'
'No. Some, but not many. They are too scattered.'
'How many?' insisted Emily.
'Some,' repeated Latobias. 'I can be no more accurate than that.'
'Can you portal the Legionnaires back onto the ship?'
'I can,' affirmed the god. 'But then I will have little power left to save any of the villagers. Although I will try.'
She looked to Muller, hoping for some moral advice.
The Knight frowned. 'There is no right answer, Emily,' he said. 'We are between a rock and a hard place. Whatever decision we make, innocents will die. By the Orc's hands. By ours. These villagers. Future villagers. All we can do is make a decision based on what we believe will ultimately save the most lives.'
'And?' insisted Emily.
'It is not my decision to make,' he replied. 'But if it was, I would attack. Then at least we know the limit of the death that will occur. Unless we lose.'
'In your dreams, sunshine,' said Tag. 'We got this covered. Ain't no herd of pig-men gonna outdo us.'
'Latobias,' pulsed Emily, speaking aloud as she did. 'On my mark, portal the Legionnaires back to the ship. Leave Quinton here. Install them in their respective gun towers, then bring the ship into firing range. Close as you can.'
'Will do,' replied Latobias.
'Gentlemen,' Emily addressed the Legionnaires. 'Do not fire until I give

the word. I'm not going to ask you make an attempt to spare the villagers, because that is a given. And I am fully aware of how inaccurate those steam throwers are. Just do your best.'
As one, they saluted.
'Latobias. Mark.'
A shimmering portal opened next to them and the Legionnaires double timed through it. It snapped closed immediately after they had exited.
Emily stared down at the encampment for a few seconds, trying desperately to figure out how to attack and somehow keep the villagers safe.
Troy put his arm around her. He had been with her long enough to know what she was thinking. 'It can't be done,' he said softly. 'If we attack without softening them up with the ship's guns, we will be outnumbered a hundred to one. Even we cannot fight those odds. Latobias will do what he can to evacuate some of the villagers. We need to hit hard and then go in fast to mop up. It is the only way.'
As he spoke, the massive airship loomed up over the mountain ridge and headed towards the encampment.
'Right, guys,' said Emily. 'We stand back a bit, those steam guns are not the most accurate of weapons. In the test run some of the shots went wide by well over a hundred yards, and I would hate it if one of us got shot by mistake.'
Muller scoffed. 'Sure,' he said. 'Bearing in mind that you and Troy are almost impervious to most weapons and the big man is pretty much invulnerable, I reckon I'm the most nervous about collateral fire.'
Emily grinned. 'I meant; I'd hate it if my friend Muller got shot. But I didn't want you to feel singled out. You know, develop feelings of inadequacy.'
'Thanks,' replied Muller. 'As it happens, I didn't feel inadequate.'
'Well, good. You're welcome then.'
'Until now,' continued the Knight.
Emily leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek. 'Let's move out.'
They followed her down the mountain towards the Orcish camp.

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CHAPTER 17

The Morrigan smirked as the withering incoming fire dwindled to a stop. She gestured at one of the Orc warriors, running her finger across her throat to encourage him to kill one more child, even though the shooting had stopped.

She had to show those weaklings she was serious.

'Looks like your plan worked,' noted Balor.

'Of course it did,' answered the Morrigan. 'These humans are so predictable.'

'What do we do now?' asked Balor.

'I predict they will attack us now. Try to get in close, take us out, and free the villagers. Or, they may simply run away. If they do, we will raze another village to the ground, and we will keep doing that until we force them to close with us.'

Balor called out to his Fomorians, gathering them to him. At the same time, the Morrigan commanded her Orc officers to prepare for a possible attack.

'I cannot see them attacking us,' ventured Balor. 'They are too few. We would outnumber them many times over. It would be a massacre.'

The Morrigan shook her head. 'Do not underestimate these people. Mentally, they are weak. They seek justice, not war or retribution. Nevertheless, they are fearsome warriors. But as long as we do not hold back, we will prevail.'

The surviving Orcs formed up into ragged squares, weapons drawn, ready for combat.

The Fomorians stood at ease; they would react when Balor instructed them to.

Seconds became minutes, and then the massive envelope of the airship hove into view as it broached the peak of the mountain.

Propellors beating the air, it thundered forward, closer and closer.

And then the steam guns opened up.

The snow tuned into maelstrom of blood and ice as the heavy slugs tore into the ranks of Orcs.

Likewise, many of the innocent villagers were ripped asunder by the veritable storm of lead.

Before the Morrigan could react, a shimmering portal opened up next to one of the larger groups of villagers. A being jumped out, swung a sword to cut them loose and dragged them back, closing the portal as they did.

‘You said they wouldn’t fire on us,’ shouted Balor. ‘And who the hell was that?’
The Morrigan stared at him, her face a picture of shock. ‘Once again, I have underestimated that bitch,’ she shrieked. ‘Kill all of the villagers,’ she continued. ‘Do it now. I’ll show them the real meaning of collateral damage.’
But none of the Orcs could hear her commands above the storm of incoming fire, and the screams of the wounded and the dying.
Another portal flickered open. This one a lot smaller. The same being leaped out, snagged two children and then jumped back.
‘Latobias,’ screamed the Morrigan. ‘I saw you. You SOB.’
‘They’re attacking,’ roared Balor as he pointed at a small group of people running down the mountain towards them.
The Morrigan conjured a small spell to enhance the volume of her commands and bellowed them out. ‘Look to the mountain. We are under attack. Group together and charge. Kill them all.’
‘There’s only four of them,’ noted Balor. ‘Why are they attacking now? Why don’t they simply stand off and keep shooting us?’
‘They are making an attempt to save as many villagers as they can,’ answered the Morrigan. ‘And in doing so, they have thrown away their only advantage. We will kill them all.’
As she spoke, one of the charging figures morphed into a wolfman. Almost eight feet tall, massive canines and claws that glinted in the son like daggers.
Even the Fomorians flinched when they saw him.
‘An Omega,’ grunted Balor.
‘I told you about him,’ snapped the Morrigan.
‘Yes,’ admitted Balor. ‘But seeing him is a sobering thing. He is terrifying.’
‘He is not the one to worry about,’ interjected the Morrigan. ‘The blonde girl is far more dangerous. Order your Fomorians to attack her first. She must die.’
There was a sudden drop in volume as the steam guns stopped firing, ceasing their barrage in order to prevent friendly fire incidents.
The Orc warriors roared the defiance and surged forward. They knew it was now a forgone conclusion. The battle was theirs.
Then one of the humans running towards them stopped, took a knee and raised his weapon.
Missus Jones joined the dance.
The steam throwers had poured an inordinate quantity of lead shot into the encampment. And with terrifying results. But ultimately, they were no more than large, fast firing muskets. A mere upgrade on 16th century weaponry.
But the M134 minigun was the acme of modern rapid-fire technology.

It was to the steam guns as a baseball bat is to a fly swatter.
Over fifty rounds a second of accurate fire poured into the Orc ranks. The stream of metal literally cut them in half. It was like their charge had struck a tidal wave of hot lead and the warriors fell to the snow in their droves.
Windrows of scythed corn.
Corn that bled and writhed and screamed.
The toll on thee Orcs was so dreadful and so unexpected that they broke almost instantly, dropping their weapons and running.
But their retreat did them little good as the terrible weapon tracked them down and tore them apart with consummate ease.
As the weapon stopped delivering death, the wolfman, the Shadowhunter and the knight were amongst them.
Followed closely by the big man.
Emily wielded Deathwalker, her ax.
Muller carried two shotguns.
Tag had slung missus Jones over his back and drawn a Desert Eagle and a mace.
Troy launched himself into the fray with tooth and claw.
The Orcs were a nation of warriors, trained in combat from early childhood, exposed to violence as soon as they could walk and talk. Schooled to accept strength as the only real way to solve any problem.
In short – they were hard.
But not hard enough.
Deathwalker spun and fluted through the air, dicing and slicing.
Muller fired again and again, at point blank range, constantly moving, avoiding the Orc warriors' broadswords and spears, like he was taking part in an intricate dance.
A dance with only one possible outcome.
Death.
Troy savaged the Orcs like a Rottweiler attacking a group of toddlers.
Tag used his combination of speed and strength to both shoot and bludgeon the enemy.
And it could have been far worse for the Orcs, but the hunters were also using their blades to cut free any of the villagers they came across, dealing in freedom as well as death.
Balor's Fomorians formed a wall around him and the Morrigan, shielding them from the attack with their own bodies.
'Can't they stop them?' yelled the Morrigan. 'I thought your Fomorians were meant to be the most formidable warriors in existence. Tell them to attack.'
'Shut up, crow-woman,' snapped the cyclops. 'They are formidable. But you have been less than truthful to me regarding these hunters. They are death on legs.'

The Morrigan surveyed the battle and could immediately see that her Orcs were being chopped to pieces. In fact, it was no longer a battleground, it was a killing field.
Without any warning, she shimmered into her crow form and took off, into the air, flying faster than any actual bird could, heading away from the battle and the airship.
Within seconds, she was gone. Not even a discernable speck on the horizon.
'Bitch,' yelled Balor. 'Coward.' He turned to see the girl the Morrigan had warned him about approaching. Gesturing to three of his Fomorian demons he pointed at Emily. 'Kill her.'
They leaped at the blonde girl, drawing their massive broadswords as they did.
But she swept them aside like they were merely an irritant, as opposed to a trio of malevolent supernatural warriors.
'To me,' commanded Balor.
The remaining Fomorians gathered around him.
'Time to run,' he said.
And they took off, moving at a speed that surprised Emily.
'After them,' bellowed Tag.
'No,' countered Emily. 'Leave them. Look to the villagers. Latobias, can you hear me?'
'I can.'
'Could you bring the ship close enough to offload Merlin and the Prof Also, send the Legionnaires and anyone who can help with the wounded. Not the wounded Orcs, I couldn't give a crap about them. The Fae villagers.'
'I will tell the Legionnaires to ready themselves. Merlin and the Prof can also hear you. Give us a few minutes.'
'Thank you.'

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They team worked late into the night. Using torches and conjured light globes to see as they searched for the villagers. Many were dead. Some were so heavily wounded they were beyond saving.
But a surprising number were alive. Injured, but savable.
Emily stood alone, a flickering torch throwing her shadow into a dancing relief.
Troy walked up and put his arms around her.
'Almost a hundred are dead,' she said, her voice raw with emotion. 'Because of my order. Because I told them to shoot.'
'Yes,' agreed the Omega. 'But we all thought it was the best course of action. And, to be fair, it was most likely the only choice we could decently make.'

‘The Morrigan got away.’
Troy nodded. ‘I never figured her for a coward.’
‘I never figured her to be a traitorous, conniving cold hearted, murdering bitch either,' added Emily.
Merlin walked up, lighting his pipe as he did so. ‘She was ever thus,’ he said. ‘War is everything to her. Without it, she has no power. So, she will do anything to foment it. Lie, cheat, steal and commit murder. It is her way.’
‘But she was a friend of yours,’ said Emily. ‘How?’
The wizard shrugged. ‘I have been around for a long, long time, Emily,’ he said. ‘And even I wonder how that happened. I suppose, many centuries ago, she may have been different. I certainly know I was. People change. The world changes. And it appears that even the gods change. Change is the only true changeless state.’
The three of them stood together. Quiet. Contemplative.
Wondering about the savagery of battle. The pointlessness of it all. The death and the sorrow.
‘Hey, what’s with all the doom and gloom?’ asked Tag as he strode over.
Emily answered by gesturing at the battlefield.
Tag grinned. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘It was a good day. We managed to save almost a hundred people’s lives. Way to go team.’
Emily smiled and punched Tag on the shoulder.
‘That we did, big man,’ she said. ‘That we did.’
And just like that, it was all okay again.
For a short while.

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CHAPTER 18

‘The Orcs will no longer be a problem,’ stated Merlin.
‘I know,’ replied the Winter Queen.
The wizard chuckled. ‘News travels fast.’
‘Rumor is that you and your hunters destroyed an entire village of innocents in order to exact your revenge on the Orcs,’ continued the Queen. ‘I must tell you, although the lower casts mean little to me, they are still my subjects and thus are under my protection. I am less than pleased with this wholesale destruction you brought down on them.’
There was a murmur of reaction amongst the courtiers present. A crowd of the usual military officers, dukes, knights, lords and ladies.
Merlin stared at the Queen. Then he raised an eyebrow. ‘My apologies, majesty,’ he replied. ‘It won’t happen again.’
Emily stepped forward, about to argue against the patently unjust accusation that Merlin had quietly acquiesced to.
But his voice rang in her head as he communed with her via their mental link.
‘Remain silent,’ he pulsed. ‘She knows the truth. These are merely games at court. Look to what she means, not what she says for the sake of those in the cheap seats.’
Emily calmed herself down with a barely audible sigh. The guilt of what she had just done weighed her down like a leaden cloak, and she hated the fact that their deeds were being vilified for mere political expediency. But Merlin was correct, they had bigger fires to put out.
‘On the other hand,’ stressed the Queen. ‘Your exploits have convinced the Orcish nation that they no longer want to do war on the Fae villagers. They know the cost will be too great.’
‘Well, that’s a good thing,’ interjected Merlin.
‘However, on the other hand…’ started the Queen.
‘How many hands has this lady got?’ asked Tag in what he considered to be a whisper. The comment came out at his usual stage-whisper volume and all heads turned towards him.
He looked at the floor and shuffled his feet. ‘Whatever,’ he mumbled.
‘As I was saying, before I was so rudely interrupted,’ continued the Queen. ‘The Orcs have been subdued, but the Goblins are a different question. For the first time in over a thousand years, they have officially declared war on the Fae.’
‘I am sorry to hear that,’ replied Merlin. ‘Although, technically they

are Fae, so I suppose this would make it a civil war. Anyway, it has little to do with us. We were here to stop the Orcs and their vendetta against us, and that has been achieved.'
The Winter Queen's eyes flashed with anger, and the temperature in the room plummeted as she stood up and glared at Merlin.
'Myrddin Wyllt,' she said, her voice crackling like shattered ice. 'It was your vendetta that awakened King Globolb's new found ambition. The Morrigan's attacks on my people led directly to the goblin insertion into my lands, and thereafter, their declaration of war.
'And do not dare bandy about your theories on whether or not it is a civil war or an invasion. That is irrelevant. What is relevant is the undeniable fact that your petty squabbles provided a catalyst for the foment of war in my lands.
'I therefore decree that you and yours will do all in their power to help the Winter Court in its endeavors to conquer the Goblin threat. And by that, I mean your full and unfettered assistance by all means you have available, at whatever the cost to you and your team.
'Already, my people are dying, wizard, and before this war comes to an end, if it is anything like the last Great War, the cost in Fae lives may prove to be in their hundreds of thousands. And this is because of you.'
Unlike the many courtiers in the room who had flinched back or even, in some cases, dropped to their knees from the strength of the Queens agitated display of power, Merlin stood straight, head slightly tilted as he contemplated the Queen's words.
'And if we do not comply with your wishes?' he asked.
'Then you will be declared an enemy of the Fae, and you and all those associated with you will be banned from our realms forthwith. Forever.'
Merlin smiled. But it was more a shark baring its teeth than a display of amusement. 'I have been declared an enemy of the Fae before, Feliticia. Long before you were Queen. Before even your mother was. I was banned then. Time passes. Bans lift, hatred turns to need, and needs often must.
'However, as it happens, I agree with you. This is partly our fault…'
'Partly?' shouted the Queen.
'Careful, Feliticia. Don't push your luck,' snapped Merlin. 'I have agreed with you, let that small victory be enough.'
The Queen nodded. 'Good. Your team will join my armies with all haste. You will place yourselves under the command of General, Sir Retton Gallant. He will decide how best to use your forces in the coming engagements.'
'In your dreams,' chuckled Merlin. Genuinely amused. 'Your general, whom I am sure is extremely proficient at his job, has no concept of

how to use our skill. He has no training in modern human weapons, airship weaponry or even magical power the likes of which the Prof and I have access to.
‘No, Feliticia, we will fight on your side, but under our own command. Look on us as a roving fast response strike force. We will harry the enemy supply lines and raid deep into the heart of their lands, bringing with us fear and dread as we strike them wherever they think they are safe. We will become the nightmares that keep the Goblins awake at night.
‘For we are Hunters, and none shall stand before us.’
Merlin allowed some of his power to infuse his last sentence, and it filled the room with a feeling of barely restrained danger. A lion tightly leashed. A dragon holding back its fiery breath.
The Wizard.
The Professor.
The Knight.
The Immortal.
The Omega wolf.
The Legionnaires.
The gods, Latobias, Sirona and Belenas.
And the Shadowhunter, who was also the Daywalker and a Pack member. Wielder of Deathwalker, denizen of both light and dark. Gargoyle commander and survivor of Death’s domain.
Emily Hawk.
The Winter Queen lowered her gaze and nodded.
The war had now truly begun.

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CHAPTER 19

King Globolb hawked loudly and spat on the floor of the throne room. In front of him knelt row after row of his officers.

The only ranks in the Goblin army were General and Sergeant. There was no need for any other interceding ranks. The simple way they conducted war had no need of complicated structures or complex rules.

There were fifty generals, all of whom were blue-skinned Hobgoblins. It was impossible for a lower cast green-goblin to rise above the rank of sergeant.

Each general commanded one hundred sergeants.

And each sergeant was in charge of one hundred soldiers.

Each combination of General, sergeants and soldiers were called a *fist,* and was made up of ten thousand and one goblins.

Fifty fists.

An army of over half a million.

Enough to fill over five Superbowl Stadiums.

All soldiers, regardless of what unit, carried the same weapons and armor. Even those that rode the giant battle-frogs.

A simple steel helm. A studded leather coat that hung to their knees. Rough leather sandals. A woolen kilt. A four foot long, broad-bladed spear. Over their shoulder, a small recurved bow with a quiver holding twenty arrows. And strapped to their waist, a heavy curved dagger.

The Goblin soldier did not practice marching drills, nor any form of square-bashing. When they moved from one place to another, they did so in a huge, unruly throng.

When they attacked, there were no shield walls, or lines of attack or subtle tactics to expose the enemy's flanks.

They simply shot arrows at you, and when they ran out, they came at you on foot or on battle-frog. En masse. Waving their weapons while screaming and ululating.

And they did so in huge quantity, throwing themselves at you until, by sheer force of numbers, they ground you down.

To face a Goblin horde in full charge was a truly terrifying thing.

Behind the king was a large map of the goblin kingdom and the surrounding lands. The map had been built by the finest goblin craftsmen and was constructed using three-dimensional modeling. Mountains, cities, even forests, meticulously laid out.

Each fist was represented by a small golden dagger plunged into the map. A tiny flag attached to each blade, designated the name of the fist.
Each one being named after the general in charge.
Fist Kazak.
Fist Blogmod.
Fist Plobble, and so forth.
The king had come up with a plan that was both ambitious and simple. Instead of merely attacking all of the towns and villages closest to his border, he had decided to advance in a single direction, across a smaller front and create a corridor that extended deep into the Winter Queen's realm. This would create a path between his border and the mountains of Zaroth. A spine of mountains that ran across the realm from west to east.
He called this corridor, *the King's Finger*.
He assigned ten fists, including three battle-frog fists, to spearhead the advance. He then allocated another twenty fists to widen the corridor, taking the towns and villages to each side of the finger as the invasion pushed further into the Fae Queen's territory.
He called this part of the operation, '*Inserting the King's Finger*'.
He kept twenty fists in reserve.
Compared to the usual goblin method of conducting war, Id Est, gathering together in a huge crowd and charging forth, destroying all in its path, this was a stroke of tactical genius.
The king also created a new division in his army. This was made up in a similar way to the military fists. Except it was composed almost entirely of civilians.
Each group in this division was made up of six thousand goblins. Two thousand of whom were semi-trained civilian guards. Not quite policemen, more official strong-arm thugs with the law on their side. They were called Punishers.
And the other four thousand goblins were families. Farmers, builders, blacksmiths, hunters, gatherers, seamstresses. Everything one would need to run a small town or large village.
King Globolb referred to these units as Dwellers.
His plan was to dispatch the requisite number of Dwelling units to each of the conquered towns and villages in the Finger.
The army would subjugate the local population, either enslaving them, or simply disposing of them, depending on how much slave labor the generals deemed necessary to retain. Then the Punishers would maintain operational security. Keeping a watchful eye over the new Fae slaves, dealing out rewards when necessary, and punishment whenever they felt like it.
Then the rest of the Dwellers would occupy the village.

King Globolb had no shortage of goblins to fill the role of Dwellers. Goblins spawned like frogs in a wet season, and his kingdom was already overcrowded, over farmed, and over utilized.
That was one of his main reasons for declaring war.
He was merely implementing his rightful *Lebensraum*.
The right to expand.
The king gestured at his chief Shaman who cast a small enhancement spell, amplifying Globolb's voice so it could be heard by all present.
'Today is a great day,' his voice thundered out. 'For today we start to insert the *King's Finger* into the Winter Queen's realm.
'Finger the Queen,' yelled the collective troops.
'Today is the day we establish a corridor, sending our Fists deep into the Queen's realm.'
'Fist the Queen's realm,' the troops cheered.
'Today we begin the battle to assume our rightful position in the Fae realm.'
'Assume the position,' screamed the troops.
'You have your orders,' continued the king. 'Now go forth and exercise our right to expand. Our right to grow.'
The troops left all at once, chanting as they did.
'Grow for the king. Expand. Expand. Grow for the king.'
Globolb smiled.
It was good to be the king.

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CHAPTER 20

The airship was tethered to a large Oak tree. Latobias and the other two gods stayed on board, keeping their distance from the rest of the team and any of the visiting Fae.
The Legionnaires sat around a fire. Some roasted small pieces of meat on sticks. Others smoked. They relaxed. Talking, joking.
A couple slept.
Waiting.
The rest of the team sat at a chunky trestle table. Next to the table crackled a small fire. Above it, hanging from a tripod, was a battered kettle. Tag threw in a mixture of tea leaves and his custom herbs that made up his famous brew.
'Why don't they have sugar here?' he asked of no one in particular.
'It's always winter,' answered the Prof 'Sugar cane doesn't grow in freezing temperatures. So, they have to make do with honey.'
'Sugar beets grow in winter,' argued Tag. 'They're a root vegetable. They could use those to make sugar. Also, the Summer Fae dudes can grow sugar cane. Why don't these Winter guys just buy it from them? They buy oranges and fruit and stuff. Why not sugar?'
'Something to do with a royal decree passed a thousand years ago,' interjected Merlin. 'I could explain it, but I don't have the patience. Just use honey.'
'I could make a fortune importing sugar from our world into this place,' mumbled Tag. 'Could become a gazillionaire.'
'I've already told you,' said Merlin. 'If you want money, I'll give you whatever you want.'
'Nah,' responded Tag. 'Don't need money. Just saying, that's all. Tea is meant to have loads of sugar in it. Good old fashioned highly processed white sugar. Not bee juice. That just ain't right.'
He hauled the kettle off the tripod and began to pour the tea, ladling industrial quantities of honey in at the same time.
As the team sipped at their beverages, a mounted scout came galloping into the camp, snow flying from the horse's hooves and steam billowing from its sweating flanks.
'The goblins are on the move,' he shouted, his voice pitched high in panic.
Merlin stood up and held his right hand out. 'Hold,' he commanded. 'Calm down. How many?'
The scout took a shuddering breath and then shook his head. 'Not

sure, my lord. All of them, by the looks of it. They began their march under the cover of night. And their shaman conjured up thick mists and other obfuscations to deny us clear line of sight. However, I could make out the fact that it was not just soldiers. The rear of the column seemed to be made up of civilians.
'At a guess, I would put their combined numbers in the hundreds of thousands. Perhaps more than half a million.'
'That is no minor incursion,' noted Merlin.
'In all fairness,' said the Prof 'The Queen did say, it was total war.'
Merlin nodded. 'I know, but Feliticia has been known to lean towards the dramatic at times.'
'Well, this time I suspect she may have leaned the opposite way,' said Muller. 'Hundreds of thousands of armed goblins are no small problem. How big is the Fae standing army?'
'Not even a quarter of that size,' answered Merlin. 'Although the problem of size is not the major issue. The standing army is actually a number of smaller armies, each one run by the respective lords of the court.
'As such, they all need to mobilize, cooperate and agree. Something that happens at about the same pace as global warming. And if I know goblins, that will most likely be around half of the forces available. They will definitely keep back a large reserve. Particularly this king Globolb fellow. I feel he might prove to be a cut above. Which doesn't bode well.'
'No worries,' stated Tag as he sipped his tea. 'We take the airship, find these gobbledygook's and bomb the crap outa them. Then go home, where there's sugar.'
'It's a plan,' admitted Merlin.
Tag grinned.
'The only problem being, it's a ridiculous one. Have you ever seen four or five hundred thousand people all together?' asked the wizard.
Tag shrugged. 'Went to the footie once. Wembley stadium. That was a lot of people.'
'Imagine five or six times that many,' said Merlin. 'If they formed a column, ten abreast, the column would stretch for over thirty miles. It is more than double the number of souls lost in the atomic bombing of both Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.
'You cannot simply take an airship and bomb, as you say, the crap out of that many.' Merlin sighed deeply. 'And to be honest, I am not sure if we would want to, even if we could.'
Tag frowned. 'Sorry. Didn't think.'
'Also,' said Muller. 'We have another problem when it comes to simple area suppression. Quinton tells me that the steam guns need comprehensive overhauls after that brief period of combat they were

recently involved in. It seems as though the best they can be relied on, is a couple of minutes of periodic firing before you need to let them cool down completely. If you don't, the barrels, the gears and the feed mechanisms warp from the heat.'

'Something the dwarves failed to mention,' snapped Troy irritably.

The Prof stood up. 'I'll go and take a look at them,' he said. 'See if I can't cobble together some sort of cooling jacket.' He strode off, filling his pipe as he did so.

'Quinton,' called Merlin, beckoning to the commander who was sitting with his men. 'Could you send someone to fetch Latobias. Then join us. We need to have a council of war. Because if my past experience of this sort of thing is anything to go by, we may very well find ourselves locked into a civil war that might last for years.'

'We can't afford that,' interjected Emily. 'While we are stuck here, the vampires are gaining power. If we spend years here, by the time we return, the world could be ruled by vamps.'

Merlin shook his head. 'You have forgotten about the time dilation. Even if we spend a year here, barely a month will have passed on Earth. And even though I must admit, we can hardly afford that, I am sure we will be okay. However, time dilation or not, we do not want to spend the next couple of years of our lives fighting goblins.'

Tag nodded in agreement. 'Two years with no real sugar. I just couldn't take it, man. I'd lose my bean, seriously.'

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CHAPTER 21

The airship flew slowly above the massive horde of marauding goblins. As far as the eye could see, pillars of smoke rose high into the windless winter sky. Perhaps a hundred fires. Maybe more.

Commander Quinton Swanepoel surveyed the situation through a pair of powerful binoculars, sweeping them from horizon to horizon.

'What do you think?' asked Merlin.

'I think that unless the Winter Queen gets her act together pretty sharply there is no way she will be able to stop this invasion.'

'That bad?' interjected Emily.

'Yep,' confirmed Quinton. 'This whole advance is similar to Hitler's *Blitzkrieg* tactics in the Second World War. Fast advance, overwhelming force, leave an occupying force behind to prevent the locals uprising.

'Actually, it is quite masterful. You see, normally in this situation, an army advancing so fast would put huge strain on their lines of supply. It wouldn't take long before they advanced too far and too fast for their logistics to keep up. Then they would have to halt, or run out of food, arrows, spare weapons and so on.

'This would also leave their supply lines open to attack. We could hit them from the air, disrupt supplies, harry them until the forward troops ran out of everything.'

'Why aren't we doing that?' asked Emily.

'Because they have no supply lines,' answered Quinton. 'They are plundering as they advance. Then they are leaving civilians behind to occupy every town or village they take. These civvies will take over the local industry, produce food, weapons, arrows. Repair armor. Reduce the locals to slavery or simply kill them. It is a strategy that is incredibly difficult to combat without getting a major quantity of troops on the ground.

'Every village will have to be retaken. Then there will be house to house clearances. Battles in the streets. This is not a good situation. And the longer the Queen allows it to progress, the worse it will become.

'At the moment, it is only a relatively small spit of land. A finger, if you will. But when it becomes a whole hand, they will be a force to be reckoned with.'

'That is some serious doom and gloom,' said Emily. 'Any suggestions? You are the military man.'

‘I am. However, I am sure that Merlin and the Prof have a hundred times more experience than me, and a thousand times more knowledge.’
‘Perhaps,’ agreed Merlin. ‘Nevertheless, I would like to hear what you have to say.’
Quinton shrugged. ‘War often comes down to a series of unpleasant choices. There is no goodness in it. Only death and pain and waste and sorrow. Whatever happens will depend very much on how the Winter Queen responds.
‘Personally, I think the quickest way to stop this would be to declare total war.’
‘Something I am not a fan of,’ interjected Merlin.
‘Explain,’ said Emily. ‘I thought we were already at total war with the vamps.’
‘In a way. But the concept of total war in this situation means, unrestricted war in terms of weapons, territory and the combatants involved. Civilians, women, children. Any and everyone becomes a legitimate target.’
The Prof shook his head. ‘Terrible wars. I remember a few. The Punic wars. The Crusades.’
Quinton shrugged. ‘As I said, there are no good wars, only good intentions. But if the Queen simply destroyed the villages the goblins have occupied, she could bring this to an early conclusion. Firebomb them, level them, use whatever means of mass destruction she has available. Regardless of whether they contain innocent Fae or not.’
Merlin shook his head. ‘She will not do that. Despite the fact that everyone looks on her as an ice-cold dictator with no feelings for her people, the opposite is true. Feliticia cares deeply for her subjects, she is merely unable to display her emotions as it might weaken her position at court. After all, the Ice Queen has to be – well, icy, I suppose.’
‘At the very least she needs to stop the advance,’ said Quinton. ‘The sooner they can halt it, the better. Then they can begin taking back the villages. Obviously, they will also need to strike back at the goblin kingdom, draw their reserves into a second front if possible. Maybe even open up another two fronts. Divide and conquer.’
‘I feel we need to meet with the Queen,’ stated Merlin. ‘I know she has generals, but they are in their positions through their standing in court, not from being professional soldiers. In fact, no real war has sullied these lands for many hundreds of years. I fear they may prove to be both ineffectual and pig-headed at the same time. My only hope is that we can make the Queen see things from our point of view.’
‘You never know,’ added Emily. ‘The Queen’s advisors may be thinking the same way we are.’

Merlin chuckled. ‘That would be nice,’ he said. ‘But rarely have I found life to be so simple.’

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Merlin was correct.
The team of hunters stood in front of the Queen. Merlin, Emily, Troy, Latobias and Commander Quinton Swanepoel.
The rest of the squad stood at the back of the throne room. For some reason, Tag had brought missus Jones.
When Troy asked why, the big man had shrugged and told him that sometimes she got lonely.
‘Listen not to these foreigners,’ pontificated one of the generals, a Lord General Ackberry Charmers. ‘They know nothing of the Fae ways. It is obvious what we need to do, and that is – simply wait. The goblins are a barbaric and stupid breed, give them a few weeks and they will tire of this new game they play and go home.’
‘Hear, hear,’ shouted two more generals, in support of their inbred, spoiled, overweening compatriot. ‘Play the waiting game,’ they added, with sage nods of heads and patting of noses with perfumed handkerchiefs.
Merlin turned a scornful eye upon them. ‘Really, Charmers,’ he said. ‘Wait them out. Is it possible that you are in fact even stupider than I gave you credit for?’
‘You don’t scare me, wizard,’ blustered the aforementioned general.
‘Oh yes I do,’ said Merlin in a soft voice. ‘For I am the stories told by Fae mothers to naughty children. Be good, little ones, or Myrddin Wyllt will get you in your sleep.’ He leaned towards Charmers. ‘Be good, little general, or one night,’ Merlin snapped his fingers, and the general flinched, closing his eyes involuntarily as he took a step backwards. At the same time, he let out a small mouse-like squeak of fear.
Tag guffawed loudly, nudging Muller who was standing next to him.
‘Squeak,’ said Tag. ‘Ha, check out mouse-boy. Merlin almost made him crap his trousers. Man, that is funny.’
All eyes turned towards the big man. He stared back and then shrugged. ‘Well, it is.’
‘Majesty,’ continued Merlin. ‘If you are going to follow this ludicrous advice, at least dispatch enough troops to stop any further goblin advances. Trust me, commander Swanepoel is an expert in combat and, as you know, I have spent centuries being actively involved in many wars. Emily is a Shadowhunter and Troy is an Omega. Collectively, we have seen more martial action than your entire army. I beseech you, heed our words.’
The Winter Queen frowned. She was no fool, and she knew that the

team of hunter's had vastly more experience than her advisors. However, she had to tread a fine line. Although no one would dare gainsay her, or even outwardly show any form of disagreement, they would couch their dissatisfaction in more indirect ways.
Whispers in the corridors of power. Her orders would not be disobeyed, but they would be 'misunderstood'. *Work to rule* would become the watchwords of the day. Military discipline would inexplicably take a turn for the worse.
Records would go missing, channels crossed and commands subtly ignored whenever possible.
Soon her job would become almost impossible.
The power of the throne brought low by a campaign of simple inefficiency.
And there would be no one to blame. No one to point fingers at.
No one to admonish for her own seeming inability to rule efficiently.
She looked directly at Merlin, trying her hardest to convey her feelings without actually saying anything. And Merlin, with his thousands of years of experience dealing in many such issues, bowed deeply.
'Esteemed Queen,' he said. 'I thank you for your time. My team and I will leave you now, so you can converse with your trusted advisors. Even the seemingly mentally deficient Lord General Ackberry Charmers.'
Charmers spluttered his displeasure, but did not dare to actually say anything.
Emily was about to speak when Merlin grasped her by the arm.
'Time to go,' he said, *sotto voce*.
Emily nodded and followed the wizard from the throne room.
The rest of the team fell in behind her.
As they exited, Tag chuckled again. 'Mouse-boy,' he murmured under his breath.

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CHAPTER 22

Merlin climbed the chain ladder and entered the ship, a pensive look on his face. He had just spent the last two hours in secret confabulation with the Queen. In her private chambers, away from prying eyes and flapping ears.

'How did the meeting go?' asked Emily.

The wizard shrugged and took out his pipe and tobacco pouch. 'I need a smoke,' he said. 'And either a stiff drink, or some of Tag's tea.'

The big man looked up from the table. In front of him were the various bits and pieces that made up missus Jones. 'I'll fix you a cuppa,' he said. 'I can always clean the missus later.' He stood up and headed for the galley.

'Call Troy, Quinton and Muller as well,' said out Merlin.

Tag gave a thumb up in reply as he left.

Merlin fixed his pipe, lit and sat back in one of the chairs.

Latobias stood at the wheel, staring out at the night sky.

Emily waited, keen to quiz Merlin, but knowing it would be better to wait for everyone to get there, or all he would have to do is repeat himself.

A few minutes later, Tag returned carrying a tray of steaming mugs. He set them on the table as Troy, Quentin and Muller entered.

'So, did Queenie listen up?' asked Tag.

Merlin nodded. 'In a way. I repeated the advice we had given earlier, and she agreed with it all. However, her powder-puff generals are more concerned with staying as far away from conflict as they can. The thought of battle sends them all into a fit of the vapors. Wimps, the lot of them.

'They are adamant they should play the waiting game. It's absolute crap, but they seem to think that burying their heads in the sand and ignoring the problem will make it go away. Or at least, they hope it will.'

'Well then the Queen is screwed,' interjected Quinton. 'And I recommend we just get the hell out of this place before the entire realm burns down around us.'

Merlin nodded. 'I would agree. However, between Feliticia and I, we came up with what may be a working plan.'

As Merlin was about to carry on, the Prof walked in and sat down. 'How did the meeting go?' he asked.

'Just going over that,' replied Merlin. 'We have a plan. The Queen has

agreed the goblin invasion needs to be halted. So, she has charged her generals to send troops to surround the finger. The Fae military setup is split into eight separate armies, each controlled by a lord general. In peace time, *id est*, most of the time, the lords cover the cost of running their own private armies via a generous tax allowance. Some do it better than others.

'Lord Charmers, for example, has cut every corner possible and simply pocketed the surplus. As a result, his forces, although numerically similar to the other seven armies, are grossly undertrained and underequipped.

'There is also the problem that there is no supreme commander in the field. Theoretically, this should be the Queen, but in reality, every general tends to do what he feels is best. Some have formed loose alliances; others just bumble along. It's a tactical nightmare.

'Anyhow, Feliticia will get armies one through six to encircle the goblin advance under the understanding that they need not engage. They will stand off and ostensibly will carry out the generals' wait-and-see strategy. Albeit, they will do so while being deployed in the field. She is sure she can convince them to do that.

'Then she shall send the final two armies to patrol west and east of the incursion. Again, keeping back from the goblin borders and adopting the wait-and-see strategy.'

'Hold on,' interjected Quinton. 'With all due respect, Merlin. So what? Apart from bringing the Fae troops a little nearer to the action, what good will any of this do?'

'Well, you see, Quinton,' replied Merlin. 'When the goblins attack the Fae troops in force, they will have to react. And once they are drawn into the conflict. That's all she wrote.'

Quinto frowned. 'The problem is, there is no guarantee the goblins will attack. In fact, if I were their commander, I would keep well clear of any clashes until I had consolidated my position.'

Merlin smiled. 'And that, my good commander, is where we come in.'

The Prof shook his head. 'Oh no, Merlin has a cunning plan. I hate it when he has a cunning plan, it always ends badly.'

Merlin chuckled. 'Have faith, Professor. This one is brilliant. And so simple it can hardly fail to work.'

'I'm sure,' muttered the Prof 'Like I haven't heard that before a few hundred times.'

'And have I ever been wrong?' questioned Merlin.

The Prof scoffed. 'Yes, many, many times.'

Merlin laughed again. 'Fine. Whatever. I need to have a little more time to think things through. As soon as I have, I will call you all together again.'

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CHAPTER 23

‘This is a crossbow,’ said Quinton with a barely concealed sneer.
‘I am fully aware of that, commander,’ replied Merlin.
‘Why?’
‘Are you any good with a longbow?’ asked the wizard.
‘No,’ said Quinton. ‘I’m a 21st century soldier. Not Robin bloody Hood.’
‘Exactly,’ said Merlin. ‘So, crossbows it is then.’
‘We got assault rifles,’ argued Quinton. ‘And handguns. And mortars, and grenades and …’
‘And missus Jones,’ interjected Tag.
‘I know,’ acknowledged Merlin. ‘Now, if you would kindly shut up and listen, I shall explain.’
Quentin took a deep breath and sat down with the rest of the team at the chart table on the bridge. Once again, the only god present was Latobias. Both Sirona and Belenas preferring their own celestial company over the mortals.
As they were in friendly territory, the Legionnaires were either in their cabins or in the mess room.
The Prof was working on the steam guns, experimenting with lengths of copper pipe and radiators in an attempt to provide some sort of cooling system. Up to now he had been less than successful.
‘As I said earlier,’ began Merlin. ‘I have a plan.’
‘A cunning one,’ interjected Troy with a grin.
Merlin glared at him, and then continued. ‘We need to get the Fae generals involved in this war. And in order for that to happen, we need the goblins to go on the attack. Now, as Quinton stated, that is extremely unlikely, as only an idiot would open up a second front at this time. Nor would any commander worth his salt extend his lines until he had consolidated. So, what we are going to do, is lure them out.’
‘How?’ asked Quinton.
Merlin held up one of the crossbows. ‘We start on the northern side of the finger. On the goblin border. They have a large military encampment there. Harass and retreat. Using standard Fae equipment so they think they are being attacked by a small group of Fae scouts.
‘That’s why you can’t go in there with assault rifles and land mines…’
‘And missus Jones.’
‘Yes. Thank you, Tag. So, you attack at night, kill a few sentries, set

fire to a few tents. Then retreat. Harry their scouts, stop them collecting food or hunting. Just be a general nuisance. Then when they send a party out to pursue you – kill them all. Rinse and repeat. Eventually, most likely sooner than later, they will have to send out larger and larger parties. And when we reckon their party is large enough, we lead them straight to the nearest Fae encampment. Hopefully, that should get the ball rolling.'
'We don't need to send a whole team,' said Troy. 'Emily and I could do it. Actually, I could by myself. Go wolfman, sneak in under the cover of darkness, kill a few of them, sneak out. No problem.'
Quinton nodded. 'That's true.'
'No,' said Merlin. 'You are missing the point. This is a game of cat and mouse. But even though you will be the hunters, we want the goblins to think you are the mouse. You will have to play this game very carefully. Under no circumstances must they suspect how superior you are. If needs be, you must make mistakes on purpose. Leave tracks. Wound instead of killing sometimes. Allow yourselves to be seen. And only in human form. No wolfmen or Daywalkers. If you simply ghost in, kill and ghost out, they will retreat. No one wants to face an unseen enemy that appears and disappears like a will-o-wisp.'
Quinton grinned. 'I get it,' he said. 'We're bait.'
'Yep,' agreed Merlin. 'A nice plump, juicy worm to catch the big bad goblin-fish.'
'I don't wanna be a worm,' grunted Tag.
Emily laughed. 'Okay, you can be the hook.'
Tag grinned 'Cool. I'm in. Let's go catch us some goblins.'

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CHAPTER 24

Troy scowled and turned to Emily. ‘We could take out a hundred of these idiots before they even realized we were here,’ he whispered at a volume only she could hear.

She smiled at him. ‘I know,’ she replied, her voice so quiet that the word whisper could not describe it. ‘But as Merlin said, that’s not the point. Even if we did, there are still another half a million of them.’

Troy smirked. ‘True. Okay, let’s do this.’

The team had split into two. Emily, Troy and five Legionnaires were designated as team A.

Tag, Muller, Quinton and the other four Legionnaires were designated as team B.

However, Tag refused to be the B team, so had redesignated his team as *Team Awesome.*

Their plan was simple, the two teams would attack at the same time. Team A from the west and team Awesome from the east. They decided to make the first attack as blatant as possible. The moment would be signaled by Troy firing a burning arrow into the sky. Then both teams would strike hard and fast. Kill any sentries they came across, advance into the camp, put fire to everything they could, and then flee, back into the surrounding forest.

They would leave a trail and lay ambushes as they retreated, killing all that followed them.

After taking out the enemy trackers, the teams would sweep their spoor, and meet at a designated point, deep in the forest.

Troy loaded his crossbow, his unusual strength allowing him to do so manually, instead of using the crank. Emily took out a Zippo, flicked it and put fire to the rag wrapped around the front of the bolt. As soon as it was fully aflame, Troy raised the crossbow and fired directly upwards.

The flaming arrow streaked high into the night sky.

The team moved out. Fast. Silent.

Deadly.

Two sentries loomed up out of the darkness. Both were staring up at the sky, trying to figure out what the flaming arrow might mean.

Both died without coming to any concrete conclusion.

As it was the Fae military standard, all of them carried crossbows and short swords. Emily would have preferred her axe, but knew that for the ruse to work, they could not deviate from the accepted norm.

And finding headless, limbless corpses would most definitely have deviated. Very few Fae carried battle axes, and even less were as proficient in their use as Emily.
Likewise, Troy used his crossbow to kill. As opposed to tooth and claw.
Another pair of sentries went the way of the first. One moment they were patrolling, the next, their bodies bristled with bolts as the A team riddled them without mercy.
So far, the camp was still oblivious to the attack. Troy had hoped the flaming arrow would have roused some interest, but it appeared the goblin sentries were as incompetent as they were ineffective.
But the wolfman need not have worried. From the opposite side of the camp, he heard Tag bellow out.
'Hey, wakey, wakey, little green dudes. Uncle Tag and Team Awesome are here to huff and puff and burn your house down.'
A pillar of flame leaped upwards into the night. This was immediately followed by screams of surprise and agony as team Awesome waded into the goblin soldiers, killing with both bow and blade.
At the same time, the flames took hold of more tents, leaping from one to the other in an orgy of conflagration.
Troy chuckled. 'Man, Tag sure is good at breaking stuff.'
Emily nodded her agreement. 'It's a gift. Now, come on, it's our turn.'
The pair of them ran forward, the rest of the team close behind. Within seconds they were in amongst the tents and cooking fires.
Grabbing burning logs from the fires, they proceeded to put flame to the oiled canvas tents.
As the goblins came running out, the team cut them down and moved on.
After a couple of minutes, Troy called a stop.
'We need to move out,' he stated. 'We don't want to take the risk of getting trapped. There's a lot of goblins out there. Anyway, we've done enough damage. Let's go.'
He quickly slotted another fire bolt into his crossbow, lit it from one of the burning tents, and fired upwards.
The arcing flame was the signal to bug out.

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Tag waited silently, unmoving as the squad of six goblins shambled past him. As the last one went by, the big man stepped out and swung his sword.
Then the rest of team Awesome joined him.
Seconds later, the goblins were no more.
Without a word, the team formed up and carried on their way.
Two hours and one more ambush later, they arrived at the preplanned

assembly point.
Emily and her team were already there, waiting in the dark.
‘Wotcher,’ greeted Tag.
‘Sup?’ answered Troy.
‘We took out about twenty in the camp, and then two squads who tried to follow us,’ said the big man.
‘Same,’ returned Troy. ‘Except we had three squads following.’
Apart from a couple of minor burns and a few cuts, none of the hunters were seriously injured.
‘I’d say that was a success,’ stated Emily. ‘Let’s move out, cover our tracks and then decide when to strike again.’

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CHAPTER 25

‘You lot are pathetic,’ screeched the hobgoblin, General Plobble.
The row of sergeants kneeling in front of him cowered, all ensuring their gazes never left the floor. For to inadvertently catch a general’s eye when he was in full flow, was just the same as taking out a dagger and slitting your own throat.
Hobgoblins were an emotional lot at the best of times. And when they were upset, well, best keep a low profile.
‘This is the third time this week a bunch of Fae degenerates have waltzed in here, killed a few score of us, set fire to things and then simply walked away. Then, to add insult to injury, they go on to kill all of the tracking teams we send after them.
‘Well, no more…’
The general stopped and glared at one of the sergeants.
‘Are you eyeballing me, sergeant?’
‘No, your honor, general Plobble, sir,’ he replied, his voice hoarse with dread.
‘Calling me a liar, sergeant?’
‘No, sir. Never.’
‘Well one of us seems to be lying.’
The sergeant’s shoulders slumped as he realized there was no way he was getting out of this one. ‘I suppose it must be me then, sir,’ he admitted dejectedly as he took out his dagger, reversed it and fell forward, impaling himself on the length of rusted steel.
General Plobble nodded. ‘As I was saying, before that moron rudely interrupted me with his eyeballing, no more. This disgusting state of affairs ends now. You lot,’ he gestured at the front row of sergeants.
‘Take a thousand warriors and a hundred frog riders. I want you to maintain readiness. When these miscreants next attack, do not try to stop them, instead, as they withdraw, follow them. Find out where they come from, and then exterminate them all. I want to see their heads on spears. Understood?’
‘Yes, general, sir,’ the sergeants bellowed in return.
The general nodded, but as he started to walk off, he glanced back.
And stopped.
‘You eyeballing me, sergeant?’ he asked one of the hapless non-coms.
With a sigh, the said sergeant unsheathed his dagger and drew it across his own throat.
General Plobble leered. ‘Discipline,’ he said to himself. ‘All important

in this goblin's army. And anyway, can't have the hoi-polloi staring at one. That just isn't done.'
He strode off to his tent, happy with a job well done.

***

'Do they honestly think they are hiding?' whispered Troy to Emily as he pointed at the thousand or so goblins gathered to the side of the camp, covered lightly in bits of foliage and mud.
Emily struggled to contain a chuckle. 'I think their intrepid leader must have put together some sort of plan.'
In a break from their usual *modus operandi*, upon seeing the large contingent of goblins attempting to conceal themselves on the edge of the camp, Emily had called Tag and combined both teams.
Now that it appeared the goblins had indeed taken the bait, she wanted all of the hunters together.
'Right, guys,' said Emily. 'Same again. Hit hard and fast and then hightail it out of here. Odds on, that bunch over there are going to follow us, so make sure we don't outstrip them. We go north as we discussed. When we get close to lord general Masterspell's troops, Troy will go on ahead to warn them the goblins are coming. Got it?'
They nodded.
Although lord Masterspell's troops were in fact not the closest to them, Merlin had advised they lead the goblins to his encampment. He assured them that Masterspell was the best of the Fae generals. And although most likely still more dove than hawk, he would at least fight back and not run. Plus, Masterspell was related by marriage to the only other Fae general worth anything. Lord Bellcastle.
Merlin was hoping his convoluted strategy would draw both Masterspell and Bellcastle into battle, and that would ensure the rest of the Fae generals followed.
The team of hunters ghosted into the goblin camp, killing sentries as before.
It never ceased to amaze Emily how slack the goblins were. The team had attacked the camp three times in the last week, and still the sentries simply ambled around the perimeter like they were on a post-prandial stroll.
Their lack of attention was terminal.
Upon reaching the first tents, they once again flicked their Zippos, put flame to torches and threw them onto the oiled canvas.
It was like the goblins had designed the camp to be flammable.
As before, warriors ran out of tents, sergeants screamed orders and green-skins died.
'Retreat,' shouted Troy. 'Time to bug out.'
'Yes,' added Tag in a loud voice. 'This is getting far too dangerous. We

must run away. Oh, much woe and anguish, I do hope the goblins do not follow us. That would be a disaster.'
'What the hell are you doing?' snapped Emily.
'Backstory,' answered Tag. 'Giving them some motivation. You know, *we is so scared* sorta thing.'
'Well, stop it,' said Emily. 'And don't ever go into acting. You suck at it.'
Tag frowned. 'I'm not that bad,' he mumbled to himself as he followed Emily's lead and ran from the camp, heading north with the rest of the team.

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CHAPTER 26

The team had spent the last three hours keeping just ahead of the thousand or so goblins that were hunting them. That also took into account the short time they had stopped to collect their cache of modern weapons, ditching their crossbows in favor of assault rifles and missus Jones.

And now, as Troy figured they were a little over an hour away from lord Masterspell and his troops, he forged ahead to warn him of the incoming war party. He chose not change into his wolf form to run ahead. He was fast enough on his feet as he was. And anyway, he wasn't that keen for everyone to be aware of the fact he was a werewolf.

Merlin had already informed the team lord Masterspell controlled a little over ten thousand troops. Mainly common foot soldiers and pikemen, with a few hundred mounted men-at-arms, and a thousand or so crossbow archers, or arbalists.

Of the ten thousand, at least two thousand were involved with logistics. Cooks, armorers, blacksmiths, ostlers, medics, tailors, fletchers. The list seemed endless. So, although it was a sizable regiment, Troy figured it might run aground when facing up against a hundred thousand plus goblins.

But Quinton had disagreed. As long as he was allowed some input, and provided lord Masterspell actually acted on his advice, he was confident that eight thousand troops could defeat a numerically superior force. But he did admit, it would take time.

If all of the Fae generals did eventually commit, they would still be outnumbered about seven or eight to one. Sixty thousand Fae combatants, versus over half a million goblins.

Pretty crappy odds.

But at the moment, Troy didn't have to worry about the future. Lord Masterspell's eight thousand soldiers should make hamburger out of the pursuing goblins.

That was all he had to worry about for now.

Even though he was running faster than an Olympic sprinter, Troy still managed to slip unnoticed past all of the sentries and gain access to the center of the camp. He headed straight for the largest, most sumptuous looking tent, assuming that would belong to the lord general.

The pair of guards standing outside the entrance gave weight to his

assumption and he strode up to them.
They crossed their spears in front of him.
‘Halt. Who are you?’ asked one.
‘Troy. Here to speak to lord Masterspell. It’s urgent.’
The guard smirked. ‘I’m sure it is, sonny. But no one speaks to the general without an appointment. And I know you ain’t got one, so bugger off.’
Troy shook his head. ‘Don’t have time for this. As I said, urgent. Now move your ass and either let me in, or go and call the general. Chop-chop, soldier. Quick as you can.’
Both guards stepped back and leveled their spears.
‘Right, that’s it,’ said the one. ‘On your knees, hands behind your head.’ He turned to the second guard. ‘Tomados, go and fetch the sergeant, I’ll watch this stranger.’
‘I wouldn’t,’ warned Troy, who was now fast losing his temper.
‘Knees,’ repeated the guard. ‘Now.’
Troy snatched the spear from the guard’s grasp, spun it around and brought the butt down on his head with a crack. The guard collapsed.
Still moving at the same lightning speed, Troy kicked the second guard’s legs out from under him and, with a swift right cross, laid him out for the count as well. The whole episode took less than two seconds.
He didn’t bother restraining them. He knew, when he hit someone, they stayed down for a while.
‘Really, you try and be polite and look where it gets you,’ he mumbled to himself as he entered the tent. ‘Bloody jobsworths.’
The interior was less tent and more silk and canvas house. There were corridors, rooms with curtain covered doorways, furniture, and some sort of mage-powered lighting that looked a bit like globes filled with fireflies.
A young serving maid stepped out of one of the doorways and squeaked in surprise.
‘Hi,’ greeted Troy. ‘Where’s the general? I need to see him rather urgently.’
The girl screamed, turned and ran, calling for the guards as she did.
Troy sighed. ‘Really?’
Seconds later, a man-at-arms in a full suit of armor came trotting down the corridor, holding a mace in his right hand.
‘Halt,’ he shouted. ‘On your knees.’
‘You lot are obsessed with putting people on their knees,’ said Troy. ‘I need to see the general. I have news about a large contingent of goblins on their way here. Be a good chap and take me to him.’
‘On. Your. Knees.’ Bellowed the man-at-arms, enunciating each word like he was talking to an idiot.

By now, Troy had just about had enough and he inadvertently allowed some of the wolf out. His teeth lengthened, hair began to sprout on his face and arms, and his claws extended.
The man-at-arms flinched at the sight and then let loose with a full overhand swing of his mace.
Troy caught the weapon as it came down, ripped it from the man's grasp, and then punched him in the center of his metal breast-plate.
There was a sound like a bell being rung as the armor was stoven in, and the man went flying across the corridor, through a couple of canvas walls and onto the floor.
Troy followed to check he hadn't killed him. As he leaned down to check his pulse, he sensed someone else enter the room. Looking up he saw a tall, well-dressed man. Long blonde hair, blue eyes, a short sword belted to his waist. He looked calmly at Troy.
'Is he dead?'
Troy shook his head. 'No. I held back.'
'Good. Now, tell me, stranger, what are you doing here?'
'Looking for lord Masterspell,' answered Troy. 'Might I assume you are him?'
The man nodded. 'Have you come to assassinate me?' he asked calmly.
Troy shook his head. 'Quite the opposite. I have come to warn you that a group of over a thousand goblins are heading this way. You need to prepare your troops. They will arrive in under an hour.'
The general nodded. 'I see. Come, we need to talk.'
Troy followed him from the room.

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CHAPTER 27

Quinton had to admit, lord Masterspell had sited his camp well.
High ground, a river running along the back of the encampment, thick forest to the southern side and a small cliff to the north.
There was really only one way the enemy could advance, and that was from the west. And much of that was over broken ground that would impede any cohesive charge. Not that the goblins did anything in a cohesive manner, but it might help slow them down.
Quinton was less than pleased to note that no effort had been made to fortify the place. Not even a wooden palisade or a row of sharpened sticks to break up a charge.
Unfortunately there was no time to do so now. The goblins were ten or twenty minutes away at most.
Quinton had attempted to advise the general on how to lay out his troops, bearing in mind the power of the modern weapons the team of hunters were carrying.
The Fae lord had not even bothered to hear him out.
Masterspell was a lord, a general and a member of the higher casts. Advice was something he would take if he asked for it. But if it was merely offered by someone that he considered to be a peasant at worst, or a simple mercenary at best, it would be summarily ignored.
He was by no means an idiot; he was simply a man who had been born with an overblown belief in his own entitlement.
Eventually, at Emily's insistence, Quinton had stopped trying.
'Come on,' she urged him. 'Let the general do his thing, we will fit in around it as best we can. The goblins are almost here.'
The general laid his troops out in the standard deployment one would expect from medieval troops.
The foot soldiers in front, a thousand wide and three deep to form a shield wall.
Behind them, a rank of pikemen, their twenty-five-foot-long pikes, resting on the shoulders of the men in front of them to present a bristling wall of steel.
Behind the pikemen, the arbalists, ready to fire over the heads of the front ranks and pepper the charging goblins with bolts.
On the right flank, higher up the hill, stood the mounted men-at-arms, ready to countercharge when needed. Behind them, a division of another thousand, standard foot soldiers held in reserve.
Quinton pointed at the tree line. 'There,' he said. 'We set up on that

slight ridge, just in amongst the trees. When they charge, we'll be on their right flank. We wait until the front row is thirty or so paces from the Fae shield wall, and then we open fire. That should take the steam out of them.'

Emily agreed and the team ran over to the spot Quinton picked out. They spread out along the ridge and went prone. Tag rolled a fallen log over and rested missus Jones on it.

Everyone did a final check of their weapons and ammo, and then they heard them coming.

The goblins were not big on stealth. Or intelligence. They had sent out no forward scouts, made no attempt to keep themselves as hidden. All they did was run along in a raucous group. Frog riders and soldiers mingled together. Talking, shouting, eating as they ran.

The gaggle of goblins came running around a bend in the track – and almost came to a dead halt as they were suddenly confronted by a force that was overwhelmingly superior to theirs.

The tables had suddenly turned from odds of around a hundred to one for, to eight to one against.

But they knew retreat wasn't an option. For two reasons. Firstly, the Fae cavalry would catch up with them and, secondly, retreat was considered cowardice in the face of the enemy. In the goblin army, that was punishable by hanging.

So, it was rather the devil you know.

With that in mind, the sergeants raised their hands, waved their swords in the air, and gave the command to charge.

A thousand whooping, ululating goblins came sprinting at the Fae defenders. Even if you have a numerical advantage, that is a scary sight. Particularly if ninety-nine percent of your troops are real greenhorns and have never seen actual combat before.

Nonetheless, on the whole the defenders stood firm. Lord Masterspell, atop a magnificent grey stallion, rode in front of them, cajoling and encouraging. Urging them to hold fast.

When the goblin charge was around fifty yards away, Masterspell rode back behind the shield wall.

And when the charge was a mere thirty yards away…

The team of hunters opened fire from the right flank.

The effect of modern automatic weapons on a throng of medieval warriors is beyond horrific.

Thirteen FAMAS assault rifles opened up in unison. All set to full auto mode. In a little over two seconds, almost four hundred rounds impacted the charging goblins. The hunters changed their magazines and began to fire again, this time in shorter, more aimed bursts.

Then missus Jones joined the party.

The goblin attack just disintegrated. In less than ten seconds, over half

of them were down. Many killed outright, but most still alive. Screaming in shock and agony.

The scene was so devastating it took the Fae contingent a few seconds to realize that the attack had been crushed and they should advance.

General Masterspell reacted first, cantering to the front of the shield wall, his men-at-arms close behind him.

'With me,' he shouted as he stood up in his stirrups. 'Charge!'

The next half an hour was mere butchery. It was less battle and more simple extermination.

Before the sun was barely over the trees, it was finished.

Lord Masterspell rode up to the small group of hunters.

Troy threw him a casual salute.

Masterspell used a frown to mask his feelings of slight embarrassment.

'Good people,' he said. 'We need to talk.'

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CHAPTER 28

‘Did you set this incursion up?’ asked Masterspell.
He cast his gaze over the team, but no one reacted.
Then Tag said. ‘I reckon me and the missus musta killed more than a hundred of those little green dudes. They were actually pretty brave, charging in like that. Not sure what to make of it.’
‘What do you mean?’ asked the general.
‘He means,’ said Muller. ‘That this is not what we signed up for. I kill vampires. I fight evil on behalf of the church. I do not like being involved in a deed that smacks more than a little of plain genocide.’
Lord Masterspell frowned. ‘But the goblins are evil. Wicked nasty little creatures. Killing them is like exterminating rats.’
‘Says you,’ argued Muller. ‘From what I’ve seen of the so-called upper cast Fae, they aren’t the best of folk either. You treat the lower casts little better than slaves. You assume your birth gives you some sort of superiority, and on the whole, I have yet to meet one of you who is remotely civil.’
‘Muller,’ said Emily. ‘That’s enough.’
‘I don’t think it is,’ snapped the knight.
‘Do not forget,’ continued Emily. ‘This whole uprising is in part because of us.’
‘Only in the most extraneous way,’ replied Muller. ‘We have no control over what the Morrigan does. Likewise, we have no say in how the goblin king reacts. So, yes, we are a cog in the machine, but that is all.’
‘Mind you,’ interjected Tag. ‘The little buggers would have killed me if they had a chance.’
‘We attacked them first,’ said Muller.
‘Dude,’ returned the big man. ‘What’s with all the pacifism? We hunters, man. That’s what we do.’
‘I am a Knight of the Holy See,’ said Muller. ‘A soldier for Christ. Not some mercenary for some queen of a realm I don’t even live in. A realm that is not even human.’
Emily put her hand on the knight’s shoulder. ‘Listen, Muller,’ she said softly. ‘If you want no part of this, none of us will stop you leaving. Or, even if you would rather stay, but not participate. It is your choice. If killing goblins makes you uncomfortable, then don’t do it.’
Muller smiled. ‘Thank you,’ he replied. ‘I shall pray upon it.’
‘You do that,’ said Emily. ‘Now. My Lord Masterspell. What can we do

for you?'
'Your weapons,' replied the lord. 'You destroyed the goblin charge before they even reached my line. And you are but a dozen strong. How is that possible? What manner of dark sorcery is this?'
'No sorcery,' answered Emily. 'Merely human weapons.'
'Do you have more?'
Emily shook her head. For all she knew, it could be quite possible for Latobias to open a portal and bring through more weapons, but regardless, she had no wish to become an interdimensional gunrunner. She was already too involved in this strange realm as it was.
'A pity,' said Masterspell. 'For I feel that after this massacre, the goblin response will be an all-out attack. I feel our period of wait-and-see has come to an end.' He gave Emily a rueful smile. 'I suppose congratulations are in order.'
'I don't understand,' replied Emily.
'Please,' scoffed Masterspell. 'I am not a fool. It is quite obvious you led these heathens here in order for them to attack us, and force us to start actually fighting this war.'
None of the hunters said anything.
'As it happens,' continued Masterspell. 'I wholeheartedly agree with your ploy. I believe the best form of defense against the goblins is attack. But myself and my brother-in-law, Lord Bellcastle, were outvoted on the council. So, instead of attacking, we were ordered to stand aside and wait for the goblins to miraculously retreat. To go home like children after playing a game of let's-occupy-the-Fae-lands. Ludicrous in the extreme.
'I suppose the whole idea was put together by that scoundrel Myrddin Wyltt?'
'You know Merlin?' asked Emily.
Masterspell chuckled. 'Enough to recognize his mark. The way he thinks. Plus, I know he's in country. Was it him?'
Emily nodded.
Masterspell laughed out loud. 'Typical. Where is he now?'
'In our airship.'
'You have dwarves in your team?'
Emily shook her head.
'It is most unusual for the underground folk to sell an airship to an above-grounder,' noted Masterspell.
'Well, we are an unusual group,' said Emily. 'Now, lord Masterspell, I urge you to have a discussion with Commander Swanepoel here,' she gestured towards Quinton. 'He is a professional soldier, highly respected amongst human warriors. He is trained in all forms of combat and can give invaluable advice as to combining our team with your forces to best take advantage of our firepower and mobility.'

Masterspell stared at Quinton. ‘A mercenary,’ he said.
Quinton shook his head. ‘No, sir,’ he replied. ‘A professional soldier. I fight for my country. Well, my adopted country. However, now I fight for Emily Hawk, last of the Shadowhunters, pack member, ax wielder, gargoyle summoner and Daywalker. And you would do well to listen to my guidance.’
Masterspell glanced at Emily, his expression contrite, his face a little paler than before. ‘My apologies, lady Emily,’ he said. ‘I had no idea you were the Daywalker.’
‘Hey, check it out,’ interjected Tag. ‘You be famous, even here.’
Emily shrugged. ‘Whatever. Will you sit down with Quinton?’
‘If you so command, my lady,’ replied Masterspell. ‘So shall it be.’
‘The man is a quick study,’ quipped Troy.
‘Yep, impressive,’ agreed Tag with a smirk.
‘Right, boys,’ said Emily. ‘I’m going to contact Merlin and get the ship here. Quinton, you and Masterspell get to know each other. The rest of you, go get some grub.’
The men nodded and hastened to their appointed tasks while Emily concentrated on acquiring her mental bridge to Merlin.

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CHAPTER 29

General Plobble seemed to be suffering from some form of convulsive fit.

A wounded goblin frog-rider lay prostrate on the floor in front of him. Whether from respect, or simply because he was fast bleeding out from a bullet wound in his thigh, was not immediately apparent.

The only thing that was completely ostensible was the fact that, out of a thousand strong war party, this poor dying wretch was the sole survivor.

'How is this possible?' screeched general Plobble. 'You say that not only has the war party been reduced to a one-man band, you did not kill, nor even damage a single Fae combatant?'

'Yes, my general,' stammered the frog-rider. 'They fell upon us with great anger and furious vengeance. Striking us with sorcery and weapons of the gods. Thunder, lightning and fire. And I heard one of them shout, *meet missusjones*. I can only assume she is one of their gods of war.'

A superstitious thrill of fear ran through the general. No one liked to fight against a god. Especially one with a name as dark as missusjones. However, he had never heard of this particular deity before, so most likely it was a figment of the rider's battle addled imagination.

'How many Fae troops were there?' he asked.

'Millions,' replied the frog-rider.

The general kicked him idly in the head. 'Don't lie. Because if I find you were lying, I will keep you alive long enough to torture you to death. And your torment will be so great as to give goblins nightmares for centuries. Do I make myself clear?'

'Yes, oh glorious general.'

'So, I ask again, how many?'

'About six thousand, sir. Maybe a few less. It was hard to tell on account of us all dying pretty quickly.'

'Good. And you have shown one of the sergeants where this took place?'

'Yes, my general. I pointed it out on his map.'

'Excellent,' responded general Plobble. 'You are no more use to me. Crawl away. Go and die somewhere in peace. Hurry now.'

'Thanks to you, most glorious of generals,' responded the frog-rider as he dragged himself from the tent. He managed to make it some twenty yards from the tent before he finally expired from lack of blood.

The general turned to his sergeants. ‘This outrage cannot go unpunished. Send fast frog-riders to Fist Kazak, Fist Blogmod and Fist Chugug. Tell them I want them to join us here. Then we will sweep down on the Fae like the wrath of the gods. Forty thousand brave goblins shall wipe them from the face of the earth.
‘You,’ he pointed at a sergeant. ‘Go now. Send the riders. Tell them to take extra mounts, I want these messages passed as soon as possible. Oh yes, those Fae murderers shall rue the day.’
The sergeant bowed low and scuttled off to do his master’s bidding.

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The airship arrived with Latobias, Merlin, the Prof and the other two gods. They hove to just before lord Bellcastle and his troops arrived. Merlin, the Prof, Quinton and Emily debussed and gathered in the command tent.
Unlike Masterspell, Bellcastle’s domain was mainly covered by forest, so he had concentrated on lightly armored scouts and arbalists.
Latobias had done some scouting from the air, and he confirmed that there was a huge horde of goblins forming up to the south. Anything between thirty and forty thousand strong.
Bellcastle rode ahead of his troops, together with a small contingent of guards. He dismounted outside Masterspell’s command tent and strode in.
In the middle of the room was a large table with a detailed map spread out over it. Quinton was standing next to Masterspell. On the opposite side of the chart table stood Merlin, the Prof and Emily.
Quinton was busy placing small colored wooden blocks on the map to signify where the troops should be arrayed.
Bellcastle removed his plumed helmet and placed it on the side of the table. ‘Benton,’ he greeted lord Masterspell.
‘Janik, brother. Welcome. Thank you for coming, and bringing your troops.’
‘Least I could do,’ replied Bellcastle. ‘Could you imagine how your sister would react if I told her, you called and I didn’t come?’
Masterspell chuckled. ‘True.’
‘However,’ continued Bellcastle. ‘You know that is not the only reason I came. I’m glad to see that someone has had the courage to actually start this war. Fill me in, who are these people?’
Masterspell gestured to each as he called out their names.
‘Myrddin Wyltt. The Professor. Commander Quinton Swanepoel and,’ he turned to Emily. ‘Emily Hawk. The Daywalker.’
Bellcastle actually took a step back, then he dropped to one knee. ‘My lady,’ he said. ‘It is an honor.’ Then he stood to greet the rest of the team. ‘Sorcerer. Professor. Commander.’

They greeted him back. Quinton looked a little puzzled, and he turned to the Prof to ask a question. ‘I hope I’m not been too idiotic here,’ he said. ‘But might I ask why Emily is treated with such deference when we are in the same room as Merlin. I mean, you know, *the* Merlin?’
The Prof laughed softly. ‘She is the Daywalker. It’s a long story, commander, suffice to say, the Daywalker was created by an artifact called the *corona potestatem.* Said artifact was in fact a shard of the sword Excalibur…’
‘Wait,’ interjected Quinton. ‘*The* Excalibur?’
‘Do you know of any other?’ asked the Prof
Quinton shook his head.
‘Well then, yes, *the* Excalibur. Now, the Fae look on Excalibur, or *Escaliborc* as they call it, to be one of the most holy of holy relics. Forged in Avalon and burnished by the breath of the Great Dragon. It is foremost in their lore and their history. Therefore, when the *potestatem* chose Emily to pass its powers on to, she became one and the same as the very sword, *Escaliborc* itself. Well, perhaps not the very sword, but you get the idea.’
‘Lady Emily is the soul of *Escaliborc*,’ added Masterspell. ‘The Daywalker is the living embodiment of the favors of Avalon. For if the sword chose her, who are we to gainsay her.’
‘So, whatever she says goes?’ asked Quinton.
The Prof shook his head. ‘No. She is not the Queen. She has no overt power but her own. However, she will always be treated with the utmost respect, her ideas will always be given full attention and, yes, her obvious standing will mean that many of her orders are followed without question.’
‘I think that’s enough talking about me like I’m not in the room,’ said Emily with a sigh. ‘Could we get back to planning the battle, please?’
‘Fine,’ said Quinton as he gestured at the map. ‘Lord Bellcastle, Latobias has already given me a breakdown of your order of troops he gained from the air. I took the liberty of breaking them down into these units. The red blocks represent the arbalists, the green, the mounted scouts. I have made no provision for the non-combatants.
‘Lord Masterspell, the blue blocks are your infantry, the blue blocks with the red dots are pikemen. The yellow blocks are your arbalists. Any questions so far?’
‘Yes,’ said Bellcastle. ‘Who put you in charge?’
‘I did,’ stated Emily.
‘But, my lady,’ said Bellcastle. ‘These are my men.’
‘Bellcastle,’ snapped Merlin. ‘Commander Swanepoel is in overall charge of the military at this point. If you disagree with his suggestions, you can say so at a later stage. But for now, just accept it.’

Bellcastle looked like he was about to continue arguing when Masterspell caught his eye and gave a slight shake of his head.
With a shrug, Bellcastle gave a sigh and ceased his disagreement.
As he watched Quinton lay the troop markers out, he noticed that the commander was doing everything ass about face. The arbalists were in front of the formations, the foot soldiers behind them. The cavalry was way off to the side, and behind them were a huge block of reserves. It made no sense. But he did as he was asked and waited for Quinton to finish before he began his arguments.
When he had finished placing all of the blocks, Quinton looked up at both of the lords. 'Questions?'
'These markings on the map,' said Bellcastle. 'What are they?'
'This is where we will place the stakes, sharpened, between three and four foot long, driven into the ground at an angle facing the enemy. These markings here will be deadfall traps. Deep trenches, covered over with branches and turf to disguise them.'
'They won't stop the goblins,' stated Bellcastle. 'They will simply keep coming until they fill the trenches with dead bodies and then run over them.'
'Granted,' conceded Quinton. 'But they are not there to stop them, they are there to slow them down.'
'That raises another point,' said Masterspell. 'Why have you placed the arbalists in front of the foot soldiers. And also, very close to the stakes. Surely they should be behind the shield wall so they can pepper the goblins as they advance.'
'As well as that,' interjected Bellcastle. 'The foot soldiers are really far back. If the archers need to retreat through them, they will be unable to do so in time. And why are the cavalry and such a large contingent of reserves placed so far to the north?'
Quinton grinned. 'It's called fire and movement,' he said. 'As the goblins approach, the ranks of arbalists will fall back by rank. Two ranks of arbalists. Rank one fires, then they take a measured step back, through the rank behind them. That rank fires while the other rank reloads, and they keep doing that. A slow, measured withdrawal.'
'I do not approve of retreating in the face of the enemy,' snapped Bellcastle.
'Withdrawal, not retreat,' stressed Quinton. 'We have in the region of six thousand arbalists. Due to the stakes and the trenches, the goblin charge will have slowed down to a point where, as long as we keep withdrawing to this area,' he tapped a line on the map. 'The goblins will have been exposed to concentrated fire for a little over three minutes. The arbalists should be able to release at least four bolts a minute. That means we will have hit them with over seventy thousand bolts by this stage.

‘What rate of attrition do your arbalists normally achieve?’ asked Quinton. ‘How many goblins might be taken down?’
‘They are lightly armored,’ said Masterspell. ‘But this is not precision firing. Perhaps as little as a thousand, or as high as six thousand.’
Bellcastle nodded. ‘I would err to the positive,’ he added. ‘Three or four thousand. However, that will still leave around thirty-five thousand of the vermin. Still odds of close to three -to-one.’
‘And you don’t think one of your men is worth three goblins?’ asked Quinton.
‘Indubitably,’ answered Belltower immediately. ‘However, my troops are mainly arbalists, and not suited to close combat.’
Quinton smiled. ‘Relax, my lord, I’m joshing you. By the time the horde begins their charge, there will be noticeably less than forty-thousand of them.’
‘How?’ frowned Bellcastle.
Masterspell grinned alongside Quinton. ‘You are going to use your human weapons to thin them out.’
Quinton nodded. ‘Yes. That and a few dastardly tactics. Plus, the use of the airship. I could hazard a guess by the time they get here, there should be comfortably less than thirty thousand, maybe even less. That means, after the arrow storm, you should be facing twenty to twenty-five thousand.’
‘It’s doable,’ said Masterspell.
‘Now back to the plan,’ said Quinton. ‘After the goblins reach this point, the arbalists will then finally retreat behind the shield wall and form up. They will continue to volley fire over the wall. Tell the shield wall to hold for as long as they can. And after ten minutes or so, I want the men-at-arms and the light cavalry to charge from this side, here, north. This should cause the goblins to move in a southerly direction, towards this area of broken ground.’
Quinton took a small bar of silver from his pocket and laid it on the map. ‘This is me, and the rest of my team,’ he said. ‘We shall open fire as the goblins start to move in our direction. That is when you release the reserves. We will have them between hammer and anvil. There we shall grind them to dust.’
Both of the Fae nobles nodded. Then they smiled.
‘Thank you,’ commander,’ said Bellcastle. ‘It is a good plan.’
‘So, I can leave the rest up to you two?’ asked Quinton. ‘Because I have to get going. Places to go, goblins to kill. The sooner my team can start whitling down their numbers, the better.’
The lords saluted the commander, right fist to chest. Quinton responded with a standard military salute, spun on his heel and marched from the tent, followed by Merlin, Emily and the Prof.

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CHAPTER 30

Emily, Troy and Tag slipped silently through the thick forest. They each carried a FAMAS assault rifle, a sword and four hand grenades.

The rifles had been fitted with custom suppressors. They didn't silence the weapons, but they did dull the sound to the extent it was difficult to pinpoint exactly where it had originated.

At the moment they were stringing tripwires between various trees that lay in the path of the advancing goblin horde. Each one of these tripwires was attached to the pin of a grenade.

They were under no impression these few booby traps would stop the horde, but after the goblins ran into a few of them it would most definitely cause them to worry where they stepped. Plus, they reckoned the green-skins wouldn't be able to figure out what was actually happening whenever a grenade exploded. This would likely cause confusion and hopefully a drop in overall morale.

After they had laid sixteen tripwires, they headed towards the right flank of the advance.

The legionaries were ensconced in the gun turrets back on the airship. Merlin and the Prof were also on board, as was Muller.

The Knight of the Holy See was taking some time to come to terms with the strange twist his life had recently taken, and he was spending a little time alone, praying for guidance, fasting and thinking.

His strict moral code was causing him much distress. He knew the others regarded the goblins as non-human, and therefor fair game. But he saw them as sentient. They spoke a language, built housing, constructed weapons and generally ran a successful society.

They may be non-human, but they were definitely not animals.

What gave him the right to simply kill them? What made the Fae right, and the goblins wrong?

So, he counted his rosary and meditated. The answer would come. It always did.

Sirona and Belenas had decided to support the troops on the ground, in order to add strength and firepower to the shield wall.

The initial plan had been to sail above the horde and rake them with fire from the steam throwers. But this had proven impractical for two reasons. Firstly, despite the Prof's efforts, the weapons were only capable of firing for extremely short periods before the gunner had to stop and wait for them to cool down. In fact, the Prof had recommended no more than ten seconds of fire interspersed with at

least five minutes of cooldown, lest the barrels warp and the gears seize up.
Secondly, much of the winter Fae realm was covered in thick forest, which meant that most of the time the entire horde was protected from aerial attack, due to the dense covering of snow-covered foliage above them.
Consequently, the plan had changed slightly. Latobias was to pilot the ship above the horde and whenever the opportunity presented itself, the gunners would do what they could.
So far, the ship had managed to hit the goblins twice. Latobias estimated the kill count to be in the high hundreds each time. A lot. But a mere drop in the ocean of forty thousand.
Tag had left missus Jones back at the camp, ready for the final assault. Now was a time for stealth and quick strikes. Guerilla warfare. A concept none of the Fae had come across before.
The team ghosted on towards the horde's flank. Every now and then, Troy would assume his wolfman form and climb one of the taller trees to get a fix on the enemy.
He had just done so and beckoned for the team to gather round.
'They're close,' he whispered. 'I think we should take cover there, in that copse of oak trees. Then, hit any goblins on the periphery. If we see any officers, obviously take them out first.'
Emily nodded. 'Yep, nice and simple. We hit them, then get the hell out of Dodge. Circle around and hit them from the back, then the other flank. Rinse and repeat for as long as possible.'

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The team had struck five times in the last six hours. If you added their toll to the goblins taken out by the booby traps, they had killed over two hundred.
But more importantly, they had put the fear into them. The horde's advance had slowed right down as they tread more warily than before, waiting for the next attack, either from the guerrilla team, or from the air.
The airship had managed to open fire on the horde three times in the same period, taking out another two thousand or so.
But it was not enough. And the goblins would reach the Fae camp in less than two days.
To put it bluntly, Quinton's plan was a bust, and he was at a loss as to what to suggest. He went to the bridge to talk to Latobias, Merlin and the Prof.
After telling them his plan was not working as well as he would like, he asked for their advice.
Merlin rolled a map out on the cart table and he and the Prof pored

over it for a few minutes. Then he stabbed at it with his forefinger.
‘There,’ he said.
The Prof nodded in agreement, his mind obviously in close sync with the wizard’s.
Quinton looked at the area of the map Merlin was pointing to. ‘It’s a valley,’ he noted. ‘But it’s far too large for us to lay any sort of ambush. And it’s covered in thick forest, the ship can’t bring enough firepower to bear, not sure what you’re thinking.’
‘Latobias,’ called out the wizard. ‘We need to pick up Sirona and Belenas. Now.’
‘Righty-ho,’ acknowledged the god of wind and weather.
The engine noise rose as Latobias turned the ship back towards the Fae encampment.
‘What?’ asked Quinton.
Merlin smiled. ‘You’ll see.’

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CHAPTER 31

Fist Kazak, Fist Blogmod, Fist Chugug and Fist Plobble moved forward. Their undisciplined surge could not be called a march. Not even all of the goblins were going the same way. Not at the same time, at any rate.

Some ranged ahead, some stopped to eat, others walked back against the flow to find a companion or family member.

It was barely organized chaos.

And now they were being constantly exposed to the depredations of a team of assassins that seemed to appear out of thin air, murder and then disappear.

The four generals had insisted they were constantly surrounded by a living shield. A double rank of heavily armed goblins who walked in a ring of steel around them. Albeit an undisciplined, oft stumbling ring.

As well as that, many of the goblin soldiers were getting so rattled, they would fire at any perceived threat. Any movement. Any sound.

As a result, friendly fire casualties were already in the low hundreds.

Then there was the airship. Every time the horde approached an area free of forestation, it took the combined urging of the sergeants and the generals to force them to cross. Because they knew, open ground was killing ground.

Death from above.

But the generals also worked out that the airship weapons had a limited output. It seemed that the enemy could fire for somewhere between ten and fifteen seconds before their guns overheated. So, the generals made sure they were always amongst the last to cross any open ground, trusting the killing was all done by the time they moved forward.

The horde had just crossed an open area, and were relieved to find there was no aerial attack. The constant sallies by the team of assassins also appeared to have stopped.

None of the generals were sure if this latest news was good or bad. Either the Fae had given up, which was unlikely, or they were planning something else.

However, there was nothing they could do about it, so the order was given to increase speed and keep heading towards the Fae camp.

The heaving mass of goblins, now closer to thirty-eight thousand strong, poured into the valley, scuttling under the dense growth of trees, reassured by their coverage.

They were about half way along the valley when they heard the sound of the Fae airship approaching. But it didn't worry them. The forest was too dense to allow any aerial attack.
General Plobble glanced up through a small gap in the foliage and stared at the ship with hatred. And more than a little fear.
Then he noticed something strange. The snow on the surrounding peaks seemed to be getting whipped up by a wind. But all around his troops, the air was calm. No sight nor sound of any stormy weather. As he continued to watch, the wind coalesced into a small whirlwind that danced across the highest peak, kicking up snow as it did.
Plobble nudged general Chugug and pointed at the disturbance. 'What do you think that is?' he asked.
Chugug shrugged. 'Weather,' he answered. 'Not our problem.'
Plobble didn't say anything. For some reason, that swirling, twirling snow-devil was making him uncomfortable. Not that he would admit it to any of the other generals. That would mark him as cowardly at best, and unfit for command at worst.
Rather stay silent.
But he couldn't stop peeking at the disturbance every time he found a gap in the forest. And each time he looked; the freak mini-weather event had grown.
Finally, about halfway through the valley, he could no longer contain himself. To hell with what the other generals thought.
'What in the name of all the gods is that?' he shouted, and pointed at the snow-devil that had by now expanded into a genuine, full blown twister.
All eyes turned to the mountain top. As they did, a massive geyser of water erupted from the peak, instantly freezing and turning into a million shards of ice that were in turn picked up by the now truly frightening tornado.
Then they saw a small figure breast the peak. A stout man holding a massive hammer. He swung the hammer high and brought it down on the rocky mountain top.
Once.
Twice.
Thrice.
Seconds later the echoing boom of the strikes reached the goblin's ears.
At that moment, the snow began to slide down the mountain, shifted by the massive hammer blows that caused a minor earthquake.
At the same time, the tornado changed course, joining the avalanche as it thundered down the mountain towards the horde.
'Run away,' screamed general Plobble.
Absolute chaos ensued as it became a case of every goblin for himself.

Some turned and ran back the way they had just come. Others decided going forward was the best bet. Yet more simply ran in the opposite direction to the avalanche, even though it was obvious there was no way they would be able to climb the opposite slope fast enough to get away.
And, because in a group of almost forty thousand beings there are always the odd few who have no idea what the hell is going on, a large crowd ran directly towards the oncoming tsunami of snow and ice.
Then the avalanche struck, and with it came the churning, driving tornado of snow and razor-sharp shards of ice.
The screams of the injured and the dying echoed across the valley, so strident that they could even be heard above the thunder of countless tons of driving snow and ice and shattered tree trunks.
It was like Ragnarök had been visited upon the valley.
And there was nothing the green-skins could do against it.

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Quinton stared down at the destruction in awe. He had been exposed to war on almost every level. From undercover guerilla tactics to full blown naval and aerial bombardments. But never before had he seen such savage destruction occur in such a short space of time.
Huge swathes of forest had either been swept away, or buried by the combination of avalanche and tornado.
It was impossible to estimate how many goblins had perished in the planned natural disaster, as much of the landscape was covered in the snowy detritus of the aftermath.
But even at height, the hundreds of splashes of bright red stood out against the blanket of pristine whiteness. A Jackson Pollock of blood and gore.
More than that, the death toll would surely mount, as goblins succumbed to their injuries, or suffocated under the snow.
Latobias, who was still recovering from the vast expenditure of energy it had taken to conjure up the tornado, pulled the ship into a slow circle. Waiting until they could get a better idea of how much damage they had done.
Quinton turned from the observation window and almost walked straight into Muller.
The knight's face showed no expression.
'You okay?' asked Quinton.
Muller looked up from the scene of devastation, pausing before he answered.
'The goblins attacked the Fae lands first,' he said. 'They took advantage of the misery and terror being spread by the Morrigan.' The

knight took a deep breath, then continued. ‘Peripherally, it is partly our fault. I accept that now. So, in answer to your question – yes. I am okay. Thank you, Quinton, for asking.’

The commander smiled and grasped the holy warrior by the shoulder. He had known many men such as this. Good men who needed a reason to fight. Killers, but killers who needed a moral compass to guide them through the killing fields.

Unlike himself, men like Muller were not professional soldiers. Nor assassins. They were the sword of righteousness. They were God’s hammer.

Quinton had a lot of respect for such men.

Without saying any more, the commander crossed the bridge to talk to Latobias and Merlin, and to formulate the next part of the Fae defense.

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CHAPTER 32

‘Man, I’ll give those little green dudes one thing,’ said Tag as he watched the horde approach. ‘They pretty persistent.’

‘Agreed,’ said Troy. ‘I mean, Latobias and the god-squad must have offed ten-thousand of them in that avalanche, tornado, mincer-shredder thing, and they still keep coming.’

‘It is their way,’ offered the Prof. ‘Goblins are not known for their imagination, nor their military nous, they are however known for their incredible persistence. Their king has told them to war on the Fae, the generals have instructed the sergeants to order the troops to attack, and so they do. They couldn’t even begin to contemplate disobeying. It is not in their makeup.’

‘Whatever,’ interjected Quinton. ‘There ain’t as many as there was a while ago. Must be twenty-eight thousand or so left standing. And many of them are carrying wounds. As long as the Fae stick to their instructions and stand firm, we should win this one.’

The team, including eight of the Legionnaires, checked their weapons.

They had set up the 60mm mortar and stacked the rounds next to it. Fifty HE bombs.

As well as this, they had sown the field with almost a hundred M14 ‘toe-popper’ anti-personal land mines. These small mines were made to maim, not kill. Perfect force multipliers.

Tag mounted missus Jones on a tripod. His ammunition, almost ten thousand rounds, was piled up alongside. Ten boxes, each linked to each other. At the prodigious rate of fire generated by the minigun, that gave him just over two minutes of airplay.

Two of the Legionnaires had been allocated to man the steam throwers on the airship. The plan was to cycle from weapon to weapon. Ten second bursts, run to the next station, fire, repeat. Giving each weapon time to cool down between volleys.

Together with the assault rifles, it was an enormous amount of firepower.

But thirty thousand is a very large number. And the Fae were still outnumbered by at least two-to-one.

Whatever Quinton said, this was likely to prove a close-run race.

The goblins, now just under a thousand yards away, started to pick up speed, changing from a fast walk to a slow jog.

As they did, the airship guns opened up.

Then the 60mm mortar, thumping out rounds at a steady rate.

The goblins immediately charged, running forward at top speed, ululating as they came.
Then the first ranks hit the toe-poppers. The mini-mines took scores of goblins down.
When they hit the five-hundred-yard mark, missus Jones joined the party. Brass cartridges, and steel chain links spewed out of the side of the weapon as it tore a line of hot lead across the incoming horde, taking down hundreds of charging soldiers.
But still they came on.
Leaping over the windrows of fallen. Waving their spears, some firing their short bows as they came.
At three hundred yards, the crossbows began firing. Slow, methodical. And at that range they could not miss.
The goblin charge had now been slowed down by the rows of stakes and pitfalls. Hundreds of the green-skins fell into the trenches, spearing themselves on the sharpened stakes that lined the bottoms.
But still they came on.
As Bellcastle had predicted, they filled the trenches with their dead, using the corpses to bridge the gap.
The ranks of arbalists gradually drew back, using the fire-and-movement technique commander Quinton had shown them.
The FAMAS assault rifles fired in short bursts, aiming for any goblin who might be an officer. The airship continued throwing lead at the horde, and the crossbow bolts rained down in sheets of wood and steel.
But still they came on.
'Cease fire,' yelled Quinton.
The team's onslaught stuttered to a halt.
'Conserve your ammo for the next push,' shouted the commander. 'Wait for the cavalry.'
Finally, when the goblins were almost on top of them, the arbalists retreated through the shield wall. The ranks of heavily armed foot soldiers closed up their shields, and braced, leaning forward into the charging goblins. As they did, the pike men brought their pikes down, rested them on the shoulders of the shield men and slid them forward.
There was a collective groan from the goblins, as the entire first rank were impaled on the thirty-foot pikes.
The arbalists continued to rain steel down on the horde, reloading and firing as fast as they could.
'Hold,' bellowed the Fae sergeants to the members of the shield wall. 'Hold. Now, heave.'
The shield wall took a step forward, opened their shield a fraction and stabbed through with their spears and swords.
Goblins fell and the shield wall stepped over them, striking down with

their blades to ensure the fallen were dead.
‘Hold,’ called out the sergeants again. ‘Now, step.’
With a deadly machine-like precision, the shields parted once more. Blades licked out, struck flesh, returned.
Hold.
Step.
Strike.
Hold. Step. Strike.
And suddenly, the goblins were no longer coming forward.
Hold. Step. Strike.
The battle was now balanced on a knife-edge. The Fae shield wall pushed, stepped and stabbed. But the weight of the goblin horde was such that the Fae could no longer make headway.
‘Charge,’ screamed Quinton. ‘Why aren’t those idiots sounding the charge?’
At that moment, the strident call of the horn echoed across the battlefield. And a thousand head of cavalry came thundering in from the goblins left flank.
Quinton punched the air. ‘Yes.’
The massed cavalry struck the goblin ranks like a steel-clad tidal wave, lances thumped into living flesh and were discarded. Then the men-at-arms rose up in their stirrups, drew their sabers and began harvesting.
Right behind them came the two thousand strong reserves.
It was too much for the goblins, and they finally broke, turning from the left flank and running for their lives.
Straight towards the team of hunters.
‘Wait,’ commanded Quinton. ‘On my mark.’
The goblins streamed towards the team, climbing over each other in their rush to escape the cavalry, and the shield wall, and the rain of crossbow bolts.
‘Fire,’ yelled Quinton.
The 60mm mortar coughed, throwing its remaining HE bombs into the center of the fleeing horde.
The FAMAS rifles opened up.
And missus Jones purred her sultry song of death.
The killing continued for hours. Because goblins do not surrender. It was not part of their culture. They fought and they either won, or they died trying.
So, the Fae made sure they died.
All of them.
The killing was finished by the accompanying light of hundreds of burning torches, their orange flame conjuring up visions of hell on earth.

Once again, Emily felt sick to her stomach. Sick of the death. The destruction. The needless and meaningless loss of life.
For that day over forty thousand souls were extinguished.
Amongst them, six thousand Fae soldiers.
And Emily knew, even though they had won the day. There were still almost half a million goblin warriors out there. There was no way the smaller Fae army could beat them all. Surely, it was only a matter of time before the goblins overwhelmed them by sheer force of numbers.
But she said nothing. For to do so would belittle the lives of the fallen.
Instead, she walked around with Quinton, slapping backs and singing praises. Congratulating the survivors. The winners. And giving comfort to the wounded and the dying whenever she could.
Outside, she was smiling.
Inside she was weeping.
Muller walked up to her and handed her a small flask.
'Brandy,' he said softly.
She took a swig. The burn of the strong liquor took her mind off her thoughts for a few brief seconds.
'I know you don't pray much,' continued the Knight. 'But I find it helps. If you need to talk, I am always here.'
Emily handed back his flask.
'Thank you, Muller,' she said. 'I'll be fine.'
He smiled. 'Yes, I know you will.'
He walked off into the night.
Emily plastered a smile back onto her face and went to congratulate more of the Fae soldiers.

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CHAPTER 33

‘We have run out of ammunition,’ stated Quinton. ‘Also, if we are going to continue to fight this war, I need to upgrade some of our weapons.’
Merlin glanced at Latobias.
The god shrugged. ‘I could probably take some of the Legionnaires back, pick up a limited quantity of supplies and return,’ he ventured. ‘But you know the risks.’
‘Risks?’ asked Emily.
‘It takes an immense amount of power to travel between realms,’ explained Latobias. ‘Especially if you are returning with large amounts of alien technology. Items that are not of this world. Plus, the effects of time dilation can vary. There is a chance, however slim, that we would leave, return a day later in our time, but only arrive back in the land of the Fae in a year or two. Or even a decade.’
‘Really?’ questioned Emily. ‘That happens?’
‘Not often,’ admitted the Prof ‘But, yes, I have seen it happen before. I have even seen people get lost forever, caught in a perpetual loop in time. However, I am sure Latobias has sufficient power to avoid most of the pitfalls.’ Merlin turned to Quinton. ‘How many men do you need?’ he asked.
‘Myself, plus four more.’
‘We can leave as soon as you are ready,’ said Latobias.
‘Give me twenty minutes,’ said Quinton as he left the bridge to find his men.
‘Hey,’ shouted Tag. ‘Make sure you get loads of ammo for missus Jones. She’s a hungry girl.’

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‘We can’t just keep calling it the ship,’ said Tag. ‘It’s gotta have a name.’
‘Fine,’ said Merlin. ‘If you want to give it a name, feel free.’
Tag grinned. ‘Yeah. I hereby dub thee - *Black Dog*.’
Merlin frowned. ‘Why?’
‘If I’m guessing right, it’s the title of a Led Zeppelin song from their album, Zeppelin IV,’ said Emily as she called on her eidetic memory. ‘Released on the 8th of November, 1971 by Atlantic Records.’
Merlin nodded. ‘I see. So, quite witty. Well done, Tag.’

Tag looked puzzled. ‘Actually, I had no idea Zeppelin did a song called Black Dog. I just like dogs and thought the name sounded cool.’
Before anyone could comment further, Merlin stood up. ‘Latobias is returning,’ he said. He pointed to an area of open ground below the ship. ‘Over there, quickly, let’s disembark, give them a hand.’
The team ran to the chain ladder and scrambled down. As they reached the ground, a portal began to flash into existence, the shimmering outline pulsing in and out of phase.
‘There’s something wrong,’ said the Prof. ‘He hasn’t got enough power to break through.’
‘Quick,’ commanded Merlin. ‘Join me.’
The Prof grabbed the wizard’s right hand and together they started to chant. The words were discordant, guttural. One could sense the power behind them. The firmament turned greasy. Breathing became difficult as the air seemed to become as thick as rancid milk. Lightning crackled, arcing from tree to tree around the clearing.
A high-pitched vibration shivered the landscape and the snow began to melt, and then to boil, raising vast clouds of steam that quickly covered the area in an opaque, dank blanket.
Finally, the portal took root, solidified and opened.
The five Legionnaires began tossing crates through the opening. The sound of Quinton’s voice could be plainly heard as he pushed the men to move faster.
‘Quickly,’ yelled Merlin. ‘Clear the way.’
Tag, Troy, Emily and Muller started to clear the area, moving the olive-drab cases to the one side.
Merlin and the Prof kept their right hands linked and continued to pour more power into the portal, struggling to maintain its integrity.
Ten long minutes passed and the heap of cases grew until there were over a hundred of them piled haphazardly to the sides of the portal.
Then two of the Legionnaires stumbled through. Between them hung the unconscious figure of Latobias.
After them, staggered the last three soldiers. All of them collapsed to the ground as the portal snapped out of existence with a loud report.
Both Merlin and the Prof swayed on their feet. Reeds in a strong wind.
‘Now that is something I do not wish to do again for a while,’ grunted the Prof as he mopped his brow. ‘What possessed Latobias to bring so much equipment through? He knew the risks.’
‘Even so,’ interjected Merlin. ‘There is not so much here as to have created such a power problem. I fear there is more to this than initially meets the eye.’ He walked slowly over to Latobias, who was now sitting upright. His eyes surrounded by dark smudges, his face pinched and pale.
He looked to be utterly exhausted.

‘What went wrong?’ asked Merlin.
Latobias took a deep, shuddering breath before he answered.
‘Big load,’ he said, gesturing to the tons of military ordnance.
‘Not beyond your capabilities,’ scoffed the wizard.
‘Not normally,’ admitted Latobias. ‘But it seems as though the veil between the realms is tightening up. It was nigh impossible to break through. And once I had, it took everything to keep it open. Without your help, I would not have managed it.’
‘Why is that happening?’ asked the Prof
‘The realm is linked to the Winter Queen,’ answered Latobias. ‘This goblin war affects her and her people. As she is harmed, the realm tries to defend itself. Closes the borders, as it were. Maybe. To be honest, I’m not completely sure. It’s a working theory. But whatever the reason, that is the last lot of supplies we will be able to transport from earth for a long while.
‘Actually, I am not even sure if we will be able to return. At least, not until we settle things down here.’
‘That sucks mightily,’ interjected Tag. ‘I don’t wanna live here. It’s always cold. Jamaicans don’t do well in the cold. And there be no spices to make jerked chicken. And it won’t be long before I start to run low on my … ummm … special herbs I need to make my tea.’
‘What did you get?’ asked Troy, looking at the mixture of steel and wooden cases.
‘A plethora of stuff,’ answered Quinton. ‘Two more 60mm mortars, thirty cases of bombs, ten per case. Fifty thousand rounds of 5.56mm. Another twenty-five thousand rounds of 7.62mm for missus Jones. Four extra car batteries to power her. A few cases of hand grenades. A bunch of claymore mines. Two SAW machine guns. Spare parts for all the weapons. Couple of disposable rocket launchers. Case of C4. Couple of F2 sniper rifles for long work, plus a heap of match-grade ammunition for same.’
‘That all?’ noted Tag with a grin. ‘No Humvee? No Abrahams tank?’
‘I wish,’ laughed Quinton. ‘We could only get what was in The Farm armory. And time was of the essence. Quick in and out.’
‘Quick in and out? You think?’ asked Tag. ‘You been gone almost two weeks.’
‘A couple of weeks here. A morning there,’ interjected Latobias. ‘And while Quinton was acquiring the munitions, I tracked down Grannus to get an update on his search for the *Triginta*.’
‘Good idea,’ said Merlin. ‘I trust there is decent news.’
Latobias shook his head. ‘You trust erroneously,’ he stated. ‘I’m afraid Grannus has gone off the reservation.’
‘Meaning?’ asked Merlin.
‘He is no longer searching for the *Triginta*,’ explained Latobias. ‘In fact,

he no longer wants anything to do with our quest, or our fight against the vampires. He has started his own cult, lives in Los Angeles in a vast commune with sixty followers and it is growing all the time. He calls himself, *Grannus of the Bling*.'

Latobias shrugged. 'Quite frankly, he's lost it. Although he is growing in strength with all of the concentrated worship he is currently experiencing.'

'I see,' said Merlin. 'When this is over, the Prof and I are going to have a serious talk to that trumped up dwarf. Meanwhile, let's get this equipment stashed away on the Black Dog.'

'Black Dog?' asked Quinton.

'Yes,' replied Merlin. 'Tag's new name for the ship.'

Quinton laughed. 'That's clever,' he said. 'After the Led Zeppelin song.'

Tag shook his head. 'Again with that song. Weirdos.'

The team began hauling the crates towards the chain ladder in preparation for winching them up into the hold.

It was time to initiate the next phase of the war.

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CHAPTER 34

Quinton and his men were exhausted.

A month had passed since they had come back through the portal, and they had been practicing their standard hit and run tactics on the vast goblin army for most of that time.

Even though the Legionnaires were amongst the fittest, toughest SOB's on the planet, they were struggling to keep up with the rest of the team of hunters. Because no matter how hard you are, it is impossible to maintain the level of energy that Tag, Troy, Emily and Muller worked at.

Quinton was most impressed with the Knight of the Holy See. For while the other team members were bona fide supernaturals, the Knight was allegedly a normal human.

Although the commander was beginning to have his suspicions that there was much more to Muller than he initially thought.

Be that as it may, the Legionnaires needed a break. A couple of days of R&R before they started making crucial mistakes.

As he was thinking, Emily walked over and sat down next to him. The team still stayed on the Black Dog whenever they were not on the ground fighting, and the galley had become their informal meeting space.

'Dollar for your thoughts.'

Quinton smiled. 'Tired.'

'Yeah,' responded Emily. 'That's what I wanted to talk about. I think you and your boys need some time off.'

'They're actually your boys,' said Quinton. 'But you're right. A couple of days should do it.'

'Done,' said Emily. 'And then I want to change your remit slightly. No more hit and run with the team. I want you and the other Legionnaires to concentrate more on the conventional side of the war. To be frank, it's not going well for the Fae.'

Quinton sighed. 'I know. It's because most of the Lords are complete idiots. They spend their time vying for power, playing games of thrones and bigging themselves up, instead of taking the fight to the enemy.'

'So, what are your recommendations?'

The commander shrugged. 'I don't want to sound negative, but there is no way we, they…whatever, the Fae, can win this. Seriously, their troops are more than adequate, but their leadership is so far out of

whack, it's only a matter of time before the goblins overwhelm them.'
'How do we stop that happening?'
'We need to change their entire command structure,' answered Quinton. 'At the moment they're a bunch of separate little armies being run by morons with no real plan or long-term goal. There is no supreme commander, the various different troops are not consolidated into any type of efficient fighting force. The scouts are all scouting the same areas. The foot soldiers only patrol their own immediate surrounds, and the cavalry do whatever they feel like. I'm amazed they aren't all dead already.
'In fact, I would venture to say, if it wasn't for the team's constant attacks to keep much of the horde occupied, the war would already be over. The only thing the Fae are managing to do, and that is not by design but by default, is keep the goblins pretty much in the original finger they first occupied. However, pretty soon they will break out. Then the real war will start.'
'If you were in charge, could you turn things around?'
Quinton gave a rueful chuckle. 'Maybe. But there's a snowball's chance in hell of that happening.'
'What do you think we should do?'
The commander shrugged. 'The whole issue is mired in politics. All I can say, is the Queen needs to put someone in charge. I'd even go so far as to say, it doesn't matter who. Maybe Lord Masterspell, he's slightly less idiotic than most of the others. But anyone will be better than the current state of affairs. Once you have an overall leader, things can start happening. Until then, the goblins are going to keep coming until they finally chew us to bits.'
'I'll talk to Merlin,' said Emily. 'See what he can do to convince the Queen.'
'Excellent,' responded Quinton. 'I'll tell the boys to put their feet up for a couple of days. Then, once they're rested, I would like to talk to the Prof about making up some sort of bomb rack for the Black Dog. Then we can load some mortar bombs onto it and go blow a few goblins up. I've actually been mulling over a few more ideas. I'll get you up to speed once I've spoken to the Prof'
Emily stood up. 'Thanks, Quinton,' she said. 'I know this isn't exactly what you signed up for.'
The commander chuckled. 'Hey, no worries. At least we're never bored.'
'True that,' laughed Emily as she left.

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CHAPTER 35

The Prof had come up trumps with both of Quinton's requests.
First, he cobbled together a bomb rack that he attached to the side of the Black Dog's gondola. A wire ran through the hull to a lever. You pulled the lever, and a mortar bomb dropped. All the shells had been primed and would explode on contact. The rack held ten bombs.
It had taken the Prof less than a day to complete.
Quinton's second request had taken a little longer. Because he had asked the Prof to make him a batch of Napalm.
It took him a little over two weeks to perfect both the product itself and an adequate delivery system. The Napalm had been manufactured from a blend of fish-oil, alcohol and beef tallow. Then the Prof had gotten a Fae potter to throw a large cylindrical pot capable of holding approximately a gallon of the mixture. He also instructed the potter to inscribe deep lines in a checkerboard pattern across the container. This was to ensure it shattered on impact.
To the top of the vessel, the Prof attached an oil-soaked rag along with a length of twine. The twine was in turn tied to a flint roller and a metal striking plate.
Then the Prof made another two bomb racks. These operated in a similar fashion to the mortar rack, in that they also stocked ten bombs, and you pulled a lever to release the Napalm pots. The major difference being, the length of twine that activated the flint striker was tied to the rack.
So, as the container was released, the flint ran along the striker, creating a shower of sparks that lit the oil-soaked rag.
When the container hit the ground, it shattered and sprayed the area with the sticky flammable liquid that was immediately ignited by the flaming rag.
Voila – I love the smell of Napalm in the morning.
The Black Dog thundered forward, heading for the center of one of the larger goblin camps. This was their first mission using the Napalm and the mortar bombs.
Confidence was high.
The airship sailed out of the rising sun, Latobias piloted it forward at a little under ten knots, or eleven miles an hour in real money. He maintained an altitude of around six hundred yards. As low as he was prepared to go, bearing in mind the goblin camp had a squad of ballista that had a range of over five hundred yards.

As they hove into view, the ballistae opened fire, even though it was obvious there was no chance of hitting them. But sometimes it is better to shout at the dark than simply sit still and do nothing.
There was no fancy aiming mechanism on the Dog. The sprawl of goblins was so vast it was impossible to miss.
Quinton waited until they were close to the center of the camp and then started to toggle the levers. First, he released the entire mortar bomb payload, then he moved across to the Napalm.
The HE tore a path of destruction across the camp, blowing tents and temporary wooden structures to pieces, smashing flesh, breaking bones and filling the air with shrapnel.
The fire followed.
Latobias pulled the Dog into a tight turn, backtracking over the area that had just been torn asunder by the HE. The Napalm pots shattered exactly as per plan, covering a huge area in flaming jelly.
As the burning goblins ran screaming, the steam guns opened fire. The Legionnaires firing in two second bursts.
The carnage was horrific.
After the guns had fired for the requisite ten seconds, Latobias turned into the sun and motored away.
The mission was an astounding success.
But no one cheered.
There was no sign of jubilation nor triumph. Because the sight of thousands of living beings burning to death, rolling in the snow as they tried unsuccessfully to rid themselves of the fiery jelly, was a scene that did not inspire any joy.
No matter that they were the enemy, it was an ugly sight, and sickened the men responsible.
Even more so because they knew, now the theory had proved efficacious, they would be back again.
And again.
Dealing out more dreadful death and destruction.
Quinton sighed. Emily was correct. He had not signed up for this. But he was a soldier, and as such, it was his job to kill the enemy in as efficient a way as possible.
No matter how much it revolted him.

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CHAPTER 36

‘You cannot win a war from the air,’ stated Quinton. ‘Especially not with one airship. Eventually, you need to get boots on the ground.’

‘But you are killing thousands of goblins,’ argued Bellcastle. ‘And at relatively no risk. I see little reason to send my troops in when there is no need to do so.’

‘Because, already our raids are becoming less successful,’ said Quinton. ‘The goblins have spread their camps out. They tend to stay in the forest whenever possible. We will continue to bombard them from the air, but we need to consolidate our plans. We have to start following up our air attacks with ground troops.’

‘I agree,’ interjected Masterspell. ‘Let me put it to the other lords and see what we can do.’

‘Why ask them?’ asked Quinton. ‘Didn’t the Queen just appoint you the field-marshal of the Fae military? Surely there is no need to discuss things. Just tell them. I can come up with a plan of attack, then you order them to follow it.’

‘Commander,’ scoffed Masterspell. ‘My appointment means little in the real world. If the other lords decide not to listen to me, what do you think the Queen can do?’

Quinton shook his head in disbelief. ‘Are you telling me; the Fae nobility would rather lose this war than obey their Queen?’

‘No,’ denied Masterspell. ‘They would never look on it as disobedience. They would couch their rebellion as doing what was best for the kingdom. They would feather their cowardice with reason and logic. They would advise caution. Recommend patience. They would talk about suing for peace, or negotiating a diplomatic withdrawal. Why risk Fae lives when we have not yet exhausted all other avenues?’

‘So, the Queen has no real power,’ stated Quinton.

Masterspell shook his head. ‘The Queen reigns supreme. No one would dare gainsay her. But the Winter Realm is based on peace and prosperity. Not war. The last war was many centuries ago. To be brutally honest, we are not a warlike people, and I fear we no longer have the will nor the fortitude to wage one.’

‘Well then, you had better develop the fortitude to become a nation of slaves,’ snapped Quinton. ‘Because in less than two months, the goblins will overwhelm your pitiful armies and subjugate your people. And you lot will have no one to blame but yourselves and your

pathetic cowardice.'
'I say, steady on there,' interjected Bellcastle. 'We are not afraid of battle. We are simply conforming to the status quo.'
Quinton stood up, his face a picture of contempt. 'Lord Bellcastle, I put it to you, the opposite of courage is not cowardice, it is conformity. For even a dead fish can go with the flow. You people had better come to the party, and quickly, because I swear to you – your nation is living on borrowed time.'
The commander stormed out of the tent and headed back to the Black Dog.
Despite his insistence that the war could not be won by airpower alone, Quinton was trying his hardest to use the airship as a force multiplier. But unless the Fae leaders began to combine ground assaults to back up the airpower, there was no way he could do more damage.
The Black dog now sported six Napalm bomb racks to argument the mortar bomb array. When they managed to strike well, the ensuing carnage was quite spectacular. However, Quinton had not been exaggerating when he informed the lords that it was getting more and more difficult to carry out any meaningful raids. The goblins were not the most competent of military leaders, but even they did not take long to work out that they could no longer camp out on the open in large, concentrated masses.
Now, they separated their camps and situated them in forest whenever possible.
And although the Napalm was still a fearsome weapon, even used on forested areas. The snow-covered trees provided much protection, as well as making it much harder to actually spot the goblins. Still, he would continue with the raids, because, even though they were no longer as efficient as they were in the beginning, they were still the only way he had of killing large amounts of the enemy.
Quinton climbed the chain ladder up to the docked airship. It was time to fly out once more.
Places to go, and goblins to burn.

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'Steady as she goes,' said Quinton, his right hand on the set of levers that controlled the Napalm bomb rack. 'Hold it.'
He pulled back on the lever, toggling it until all ten vessels had been dispatched. As he moved across to the next rack, the Black Dog lurched sideways, losing height as it pulled into a tight turning dive, sending him staggering across the bridge.
'Hey?' he shouted. 'Careful, Latobias. We got explosive ordnance strapped to the side of the ship and it's not that stable.'

‘We have worse problems than that,’ observed the Celtic god laconically.
‘What do you mean?’ asked Quinton.
Latobias pointed forward.
Bearing down on them were two large airships. Both painted a muddy green. Quinton noticed straight away that neither of them had the graceful lines of the Dog. Squatter, smaller gondolas and single props. Ugly and utilitarian.
Where the Black Dog was a leopard, the approaching ships were warthogs. Or maybe even pot-bellied porkers with attitude. Porcine blimps.
But the most obvious difference was their weaponry. The sky-porkers literally bristled with gun barrels.
‘What the hell?’ yelled Quinton. ‘I thought we were the only ones in this fight with an airship.’
‘Maybe that was true,’ said Latobias. ‘But we can obviously no longer run under that belief.’
‘Hold on,’ continued the commander. ‘We can’t be sure if they’re the enemy. For all we know, they could be coming to help.’
At that moment, the two ships opened fire.
‘Well, I guess that puts an end to the helpful ally’s theory,’ snarked Latobias.
‘Can we take them?’ asked Quinton.
Latobias shook his head. ‘We can outfly them. But they outgun us by almost four to one. That means, while our gunners are cooling down, they will still be able to fire.’
‘What do you suggest?’
‘I suggest we get out of here, regroup and think about this. I don’t need to say that the appearance of opposing airpower has put a definite kink in our current plans.’
Quinton nodded. ‘Right, get us the heck out of here.’
Latobias pulled back on the yoke, driving the airship upwards. At the same instance, he wove a package of time and space around the craft. Minutes later, they were safely out of sight of the sky-porkers, heading for home base.

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CHAPTER 37

Both Merlin and Emily sat opposite the Queen. They had requested a meeting in an attempt to convince her of the dire peril her realm was in.

'The dark dwarves have allied themselves to the goblins,' said Merlin. 'In particular, the Mountain Dray clan. The goblin King has guaranteed them all of the mining rights in the conquered territories.

'In return, the Mountain Dray have added their fleet of four airships to the fray. Currently, it looks as though this is the limit to their military additions. However, it is enough. Without the Black Dog being able to operate freely, well, frankly, Feliticia, there is now nothing standing in the way of a goblin onslaught.'

Merlin sighed. 'Is there no one you can ask for help?'

The Winter Queen shook her head. 'Who?'

'What about the Summer Court?'

She let out a contemptuous snort. 'Really, Myrddin? You know better than that.'

'I know, grasping at straws, I suppose.'

'And the *Hulder*?' asked Emily.

'They would soon as join the goblins than help the Fae.'

'Feliticia, this is serious,' stressed Merlin. 'If you cannot get your lords to obey their Field Marshall, or you, you will be looking at the end of a realm. And that could spell disaster for more than just the Winter Fae. The rot could spread. Who knows what the ramifications might be?'

'Curse those cowardly lordlings,' snapped the Queen. 'If I push them any harder, I fear many of them would take it into their own hands to sue for peace with the goblins.'

'The goblins would rather wipe them out,' said Merlin. 'They have little honor.'

'We cannot send for more Legionnaires,' added Emily. 'The realms have closed tight shut, and even Latobias can no longer travel between them.'

'We have an alternative,' said the Queen softly.

'Pray, tell,' urged Merlin.

'I am considering calling on, the Kindly Ones.'

Merlin blanched. 'You can't be serious.'

'It is my right as Queen. And I have nowhere else to turn.'

'I'm sorry, who are the kindly ones?' asked Emily.

‘The Kindly Ones,’ said Merlin. ‘Are also known as, the Furies. Myth and legend talk of them as three kindly sisters who dwell beneath. They are the Fae gods of vengeance and retribution. They are said to punish those who carry out crimes against the natural order.’
‘That doesn’t sound so bad,’ noted Emily.
‘Huh!’ scoffed Merlin. ‘Firstly, the myths are just that. Legends, folklore. Wishful bloody thinking. Secondly, there are not, and have never been only three furies. There are dozens. No one is sure how many. And finally, they are anything but kindly. They are a psychotic group of deadly flying harpies, cruel and bloodthirsty in the extreme. Once you let them out, Pandoras box has nothing on the horrors of the Furies.
‘Do not do it, Feliticia. I beg you. It could very well end in horror and bloodshed.’
‘If I do not, it will most definitely end in bloodshed,’ argued the Queen. ‘You said yourself, there is no way we can win. The end is unavoidable. I would rather take the gamble than bank on the inevitable outcome we all know is coming.’
Merlin shook his head. But he did not answer.
‘My mind is made up, old friend,’ said the Queen. ‘Now leave me, I have to prepare for the calling ceremony.’
Both Emily and Merlin stood up.
Emily bowed and turned away.
Merlin took the Queen’s hand and kissed it. ‘Good luck, Feliticia,’ he said quietly. ‘I beg you to reconsider. But whatever you decide, may the gods grant you strength.’

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CHAPTER 38

‘I know what to do,’ said Emily. ‘At the moment, we are facing two enemies. The goblins, and the dark dwarves. The dwarves are currently commanding the air, and the goblins the ground. I know we all agree, barring some major miracle, we’re screwed.’
There was a general murmur of agreement from the team.
‘In addition to this, we shouldn’t even be here. We have vampires to kill. Our world totters on the edge, and we are stuck here with the damn fairies.’
‘Umm…don’t call them that,’ interjected Latobias. ‘It is considered a dire insult to refer to the Fae as, fairies.’
‘Huh,’ scoffed Emily. ‘Like I care? What are they going to do, Latobias? Try to talk me to death? Run away and hope I change my mind? They are pathetic, and I care little for what may offend them.’
The Celtic god shrugged. ‘Fair enough,’ he conceded with a slight grin. ‘Continue, what is your plan?’
‘We cannot fight the entirety of two nations,’ continued Emily. ‘So, I suggest, we cut the head of the snake off.’
‘You mean, kill all of the goblin generals?’ asked Quinton. ‘It’s a tall order.’
‘I said the head,’ stressed Emily. ‘We need to assassinate the goblin king. At the same, the dwarves must be nullified. Obviously, it is a little more difficult there, due to the fact that they don’t have a king. I assume the Mountain Dray dwarves govern themselves in the same ways as the other clans?’
The Prof nodded.
‘Good, that means we shall have to kill the Mine Master, the Tunnel Masters, the Rock Master and the Mine Captain.’
‘Oh, that should be easy,’ interjected Tag. ‘I’ll just stroll in to the mine, find a bunch of short warrior dudes in the dark, kill them and come home. And in case no one noticed,’ he continued. ‘I’m being sarcastic.’
‘We noticed,’ said Emily. ‘Subtlety not exactly being your strong suit. However, that’s not your problem. Troy and I will be taking the dwarves on. We work well in the dark. You and Muller will take care of the goblin general.’
There was a stunned pause, and then everyone began talking at once.
‘It’s impossible,’ said Quinton, raising his voice above the rest.
‘No,’ answered Emily. ‘It’s difficult. But it could be done.’
Quinton shook his head.

‘How?’ asked Merlin.
‘We would ingress at night. Tomorrow,’ answered Troy. ‘It’s a new moon and the weather promises to be rainy and overcast. Latobias would take us close to our objectives and drop us off. Tag and Muller first, then Emily and I on the way back.
‘To be honest, we don’t have much info on either the goblins or the dwarves’ residences. But we do know where they are, and that’s enough. No need to complicate things with a plan. We go in, kill them, and try our darndest to get out alive.’
Tag laughed. ‘I take back what I said. I’m in. Sounds like fun. What about you, pious one?’
Muller smiled. ‘If it will stop this interminable bloodshed and allow us to go home, I am all for it.’
‘Operation New Moon,’ said Tag.
‘Why not?’ agreed Emily. ‘It’s as good a name as any.’ She turned to Merlin. ‘Do you think you could convince the Queen to stay her plans regarding the Furies for a bit?’
The wizard nodded. ‘I’m sure she will give us a couple of days. But no more.’
Emily nodded. ‘Well, we’re good to go. Let’s rest up. Tomorrow we’ll sort our kit out and set off after dark.’

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CHAPTER 39

The Black Dog shouldered the dank air aside as it slipped silently through the moonless night sky.

The massive steam driven propellers barely ticked over as Latobias used his inherent power to ease the ship forward. When he judged they were as close as they could get to the goblin king's royal enclosure without being spotted, he dropped the ship even lower.

Muller threw out a rope for Tag and him to climb down. They eschewed the usual chain ladder as it might make a noise when deployed.

Dressed all in black, the two men slid down the rope and jumped lightly to the ground, slipping into the nearest shadows as soon as they hit the snow.

Latobias pulled back on the yoke, and the airship ghosted upwards and away, heading towards the Folsom Mountains that contained the mines and dwellings of the dwarven Mountain Dray clan.

The ship hove to in a protected valley alongside one of the known entrances to the Dark Dwarves system of mines and tunnels. Neither Troy nor Emily bothered with a rope, they simply jumped from a height of over forty feet, landing silently in the snow and then disappearing into the night.

The hunt was on.

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CHAPTER 40

Tag and Muller stuck to the trees, using them for cover as they approached the palisade surrounding the king's enclave.

For the sake of stealth, Tag had forgone missus Jones. Instead, he carried his two .50 cal Desert Eagles, both with custom suppressors.

Muller carried his usual shotgun, and had also fitted a suppressor. A Salvo 12 shotgun suppressor. In no way did it silence the weapon, but it did make it a lot quieter, concealed some of the muzzle flash and calmed the recoil.

He also carried his flask of Holy Water.

When Tag had asked him why, he had replied – *because*. And since Tag was Tag, he found this cryptic answer to be totally acceptable.

The two of them also carried a large selection of blades, throwing knives, short swords, daggers and even a garrote.

'This place is huge,' whispered Tag. 'How we ever gonna find the head honcho, it's gonna take forever.'

'We can only do what we can do,' replied Muller.

'Yeah, duh!' said Tag. 'Obviously.'

They continued forward, inching through the shadows, skirting the palisaded area, looking for a way to achieve ingress without being seen.

Muller pointed at a gap in the structure. Not a gate, simply a result of shoddy workmanship. The poles were leaning to one side, and the rope that bound them together had not been tightened correctly. With little effort, they pushed aside a few of the poles and slipped through.

'Why aren't there any guards?' asked Tag.

Muller shrugged. 'We're far in country,' he whispered. 'But I'm sure there must be some guards. After all, he is their king.'

'Yeah,' chuckled Tag. 'And we here to kill him.'

As they crept along the inside of the perimeter, a goblin staggered out of a tent and blundered towards them. They were hidden in the shadows cast by the flickering torchlight and both of them froze.

Movement attracts attention.

The goblin lurched towards them, and as he got closer it was quite obvious he had been drinking. A lot.

Fumbling with his loincloth he prepared himself to rid himself of the excess alcohol.

But before he could, a throwing knife spun out of the darkness and struck him in the throat.

He fell to the ground, twitched a couple of times, and lay still.
'Why?' snapped Muller, his voice an angry whisper.
'He was going to pee on me,' answered Tag.
'So, you stabbed him?'
'Yeah, because if I shot him, everyone would hear,' explained Tag.
'But…'
'Hey,' reacted Tag. 'I'm here to kill the king, not to get peed on. Now stop getting so wound up, let's find the boss and do our job.'
Muller followed the big man as he stalked further into the royal enclosure. As they progressed, the area became more populated. The mixture of tents and shacks slowly gave way to more substantial canvas roofed dwellings with wood walls.
It also became more difficult to avoid detection. Not only from guards, but also from the many goblins wandering around. Lots were soldiers, but mainly they appeared to be servants of some sort. Fetching, carrying, sweeping.
The two friends slipped from structure to structure, using the flickering shadows cast by the numerous torches to remain concealed. But the going was slow. They often had to remain statue-still for minutes at a time, barely even breathing.
'This is rubbish,' complained Tag. 'At this rate, the sun is gonna come up before we find where the kingly dude is.'
'This is the only way we can do things,' whispered Muller. 'Sometimes slow is quick and quick is slow.'
Tag sighed.
Muller raised an eyebrow. He had seen the big man before in this sort of mood. 'Hey, don't do anything stupid,' he stressed.
Tag didn't reply. Instead, he stepped out of the shadows, grabbed one of the servants by the neck and dragged him back into cover. Then he clamped a hand over his mouth.
The male goblin looked terrified, his eyes almost standing out on stalks.
'What the hell?' said Muller.
Tag grinned. 'This is one of those times where quick is quick and slow is stupid.' He turned to the goblin. 'Okay, little green dude. I'm gonna ask you a question, then I'm gonna take my hand off your mouth and you will answer. Softly and quickly. If you make a noise or shout for help, I'll snap your neck. Blink if you understand.'
The goblin blinked frantically.
'Cool. Now, where's the king at?'
Tag took his hand off the goblin's mouth.
He immediately screamed out loud. 'Beware the king,' he yelled. 'Assassins! Assassins!'
Tag punched him in the side of his head, knocking him unconscious.

‘Well, looks like quick just got slow again,’ noted Muller as crowds of goblins came running towards them, many of them armed.
‘It’s a stupid expression anyway,’ mumbled Tag as he drew his Desert Eagles.
Muller grabbed the big man by his arm. ‘Come on, let’s move. This is not the right place to make a stand.’
Tag reluctantly allowed himself to be dragged away, running through the maze of tents and shacks in an attempt to lose their pursuers.
Twisting around a corner, they ran smack into a group of spear wielding warriors. There was a brief scuffle as Tag grabbed one and threw him bodily into the rest, knocking them down like ninepins.
Sprinting forward, they were once again surrounded. Muller’s shotgun boomed, its usual loud thunder slightly softened by the suppressor. Tag joined in, firing fast and furiously.
A dozen goblins hit the snow.
But now there seemed to be no end to them.
Shrieking war cries, and paying little heed to their own safety, the goblins swarmed towards them, attempting to overwhelm them by sheer force of numbers.
Muller reloaded and fired again.
Tag kept pulling the triggers on his weapons until the slides locked back, then he dropped them and started throwing knives.
Finally, he drew his short sword and began wielding it like a psychotic Babe Ruth tribute act, hacking off limbs and heads at will.
Muller, likewise was doing his best to stave off the inevitable, albeit with a little more grace than Tag’s lumberjack style hewing.
The bodies piled up around them, yet still more threw themselves into the fray, stabbing with their spears and swords. A few archers fired some arrows, but after a couple of friendly-fire incidents, they stopped.
‘Well, this isn’t going as well as I thought it would,’ grunted Tag as he sliced and diced.
‘Really,’ snapped Muller. ‘You actually thought? I find that hard to believe.’
‘Okay,’ returned Tag. ‘Don’t get all snippy on me, I made a mistake. Live with it.’
‘That’s the problem,’ said Muller, as his sword flashed forward to decapitate another victim. ‘I very much doubt we will live through this.’
‘Yeah,’ agreed Tag. ‘Sorry, man. Seriously. I never counted on dying in some foreign realm. This sucks.’
‘Now don’t get all morbid on me,’ said Muller. ‘There are worse ways to go. At least we’ll go with our boots on. Anyway, aren’t you immortal?’

‘Wouldn’t count on recovering if one of these little dudes cuts my head off.’
‘True,’ agreed Muller.
Suddenly, the goblins pulled back and instead of throwing themselves willy-nilly at the pair, they organized their ranks into rows. Ten wide and five deep. Then they heft their shields to form a wall, and charged.
‘I miss missus Jones,’ said Tag.
‘Me too,’ admitted Muller. ‘Me too.’
And they launched themselves at the wall of steel.

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CHAPTER 41

Troy had gone wolfman.

And Emily allowed her dark side a little free reign. To the extent that her fangs had extended and her eyes were like two pieces of polished obsidian, instead of their usual sea-blue.

They moved through the night unseen. The dark more than their friend, it was an integral part of them.

They did not hide in the shadows; they were the shadows.

They did not even need to speak to communicate, using their pack awareness instead.

Silent and unseen they approached the entrance to the underground dwarven city.

Unlike the Understone clan of Megagran Mountain, the Mountain Dray clan had not protected their entrance with magic. Instead, they relied on good old-fashioned steel and muscle.

The cave entrance was blocked by a huge, steel door. In front of it stood ten guards. All heavily armored, carrying either battle axes or war hammers and sporting large rectangular shields.

'That lot shouldn't be a problem,' pulsed Troy, as he mentally communicated with Emily.

'I agree,' she returned. 'However, maybe the door is bolted from the inside. If so, I doubt we could smash it down. Also, I don't reckon we could kill them fast enough to prevent one of them sounding the alarm.'

'What do you suggest?'

'Let's scout around,' replied Emily. 'I bet there's another entrance. Or maybe even some natural fissure or tunnel. If there is, we can find it. Let's move.'

As they moved off, Troy went full wolf. His senses were at their peak in that form, and he would need them to discover another way in.

They headed in a wide circle, Troy's nose leading the way.

Twenty minutes later he stopped. He could smell sweat, and leather, and tiny amounts of smoke. Sniffing deeply, he loped forward, circling amongst the bushes that covered the rocky mountainside.

Finally, he pushed his way deep into one of the thickets of gorse.

'Here,' he pulsed the thought to Emily who slid through the bush and took a knee next to him.

Hidden by the rough shrubs was an irregular opening. Perhaps four foot in diameter.

‘Looks like a natural fault,’ said Emily. ‘You think we should take a look?’
‘Yep,’ replied Troy. ‘I can smell dwarves. I don’t think this is ever used, but it’s close enough to their dwellings to carry their scent. Although, it may peter out into a dead end, with just enough of an opening to allow their scent through.’
‘Only way we can find out is take a look,’ said Emily.
Troy morphed back into his wolfman form as Emily bent over and shuffled into the opening.
The tunnel was pitch black, but that proved to be little problem to the couple’s supernatural ability to see in the dark.
There were a few uncomfortable moments when Troy struggled to ease his bulk through some extremely narrow passages, but bar a few bits of skin and fur, he made it through.
After almost half an hour, the fissure opened out onto a ledge. Emily peeked out. Some twenty or thirty feet below her was the main dwelling hall of the Mountain Dray clan. The roof of the cavern rose more than sixty feet above, and the area was lit by hundreds of tethered glow-balls. Round bulbs of blown glass containing a minor charm that immitted a pale blue light.
The effect was at once both beautiful and ethereal.
Even though the cavern was obviously protected from any natural elements, the dwarven houses were built the same way as they would have been built outside. Walls, doors, windows and roofs. Except, on the whole, the roofs were simple flat structures, there for privacy as opposed to keeping the wind and snow out.
The cavern stretched for many hundreds of yards, and from their position they could see the area was divided into dwellings, a market and further away, what seemed to be workshops, smithies and sundry light industry.
Beyond that they could glimpse another large cavern, containing a number of the Mountain Dray, sky-pig airships.
Emily pointed to a group of houses that were situated almost in the middle of the residential area. There were six of them, and they were substantially larger and more ornate than the others around them.
‘Odds on that’s where the Masters live.’
‘I reckon you’re right,’ growled Troy softly.
‘I wonder if this place has a night time?’ wondered Emily aloud. ‘Or do the glow-balls stay on all the time?’
‘It’s night outside,’ said Troy. ‘So, I figure this is it.’
‘I agree,’ said Emily. ‘How are we going to get into those houses without being seen?’
‘Easy,’ responded Troy. ‘Sneak in over the roofs. No one ever looks up. As long as we’re quiet, and we are, they won’t spot us.’

‘Okay,’ agreed Emily. ‘Let’s start by climbing along the walls to that point over there, then we can jump down and make our way across.’
Troy nodded. ‘Cool, let’s go.’

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CHAPTER 42

‘You look like crap,’ said Tag.
Muller grunted in pain. He couldn’t move on account of being chained to a stout wooden chair.
As was Tag.
‘I’m alive,’ the knight mumbled. ‘How about that?’
He glanced over at Tag and gasped in shock. ‘What the… you’re full of arrows.’
‘Yeah,’ responded the big man. ‘It sucks.’
‘But, there’s like twenty of them. How come you aren’t … never mind. I suppose it would take more than that to kill you.’
‘Hurts,’ grunted Tag.
‘How come they left them in you?’
‘They pulled a couple out after they took me down. But then they saw I healed up as soon as the arrow was out, so they stopped. Figured best leave them in. Quite clever actually. Can’t heal, can’t break these chains. All in all, not having a great time.’
Blood ran from a cut in Muller’s forehead into his eye. He blinked to clear it, and then looked around the room. It was basically a square wooden box made from raw logs strapped together with rope. The door was open and he could see a squad of heavily armed guards ranked outside.
‘Why didn’t they kill us?’
‘Reckon they want to talk,’ guessed Tag. ‘Which isn’t gonna be good. I suspect we’re in for a bit of pain and suffering. Well, a bit *more* pain and suffering to be accurate.’
Before Muller could respond to Tag’s bleak outlook on their predicament, the ranks of guards opened and a large, blue-skinned hobgoblin walked through, flanked by two personal bodyguards.
He entered the room and stared at the two prisoners with contempt.
‘Murderers,’ he said, and he spat at them.
‘Hey, not cool,’ exclaimed Tag. ‘What’s with the spitting, guy? It’s unhygienic. Who knows where that mouth has been?’
The goblin stepped forward and punched Tag in the face. Then he grasped one of the arrows and twisted it viciously.
Tag snarled at him. ‘Wait until I get these chains off, little boy blue. I’m gonna smash you up.’
The hobgoblin laughed and twisted the arrow a bit more. ‘Lucky for me,’ he said. ‘You won’t be getting out of those chains. Not alive at

any rate.'
Tag threw himself from side to side in an attempt to break free. But the chains were bound too tight, and he couldn't get any leverage.
'Why haven't you killed us already?' asked Muller.
'First we will ask questions. Then we will get answers. Then death,' informed the hobgoblin with a sneer. He didn't even look at Muller when he answered. Keeping his gaze on Tag whom he obviously considered the greater threat.
'I'll death you, asswipe,' yelled Tag, still attempting to tear free of the chains.
Muller, however, remained calm. Still. As relaxed as he could. Because, unlike Tag, he could actually feel a little slack in his chains. He reckoned it must be due to the fact that the goblins seemed to see him as less of a danger.
And if he let his body go limp, they slackened even more.
The hobgoblin turned to the door and barked out a string of instructions. Moments later, a group of goblins filed in, carrying a pair of stout lengths of rope. Without removing the chains or releasing them from the chairs, the goblins proceeded to wind the ropes around the two hunters and tie it off.
Then they gathered into two teams of six and with a heave, pulled them both onto the floor and began to drag them along the ground.
Muller grimaced against the pain being inflicted on his already battered body.
Tag, was now in almost unparalleled amounts of agony due the arrows imbedded in his chest, arms and legs bending and twisting as he was dragged roughly across the snow. And he gave full voice to his suffering.
'Aargh! You little puddles of pond-scum have dragged your last Jamaican,' he bellowed. 'When the time comes for a reckoning, I is gonna tear you into little, itty-bitty goblin-chunks.
'And then I'm gonna collect up all the chunks and…'
His rant was cut off as the hobgoblin kicked him in the face.
'Shut up, stupid human,' he yelled. 'We take you to see the king. It will be your great honor to die in his presence.'
'I'll honor you. Blue piece of…'
Another savage kick stopped Tag for a while as he passed out from the pain and the kicking.
Muller, however, remained poker-faced as he felt his chains slipping even more while they scraped against the frozen earth under the carpet of snow.
The two friends were dragged across the encampment for almost five minutes, heading towards the center. By the time they were finally hauled into a large, mixed wood and canvas dwelling, Muller was

literally holding his chains on by swelling his chest and grasping the ends in both hands. He had no desire for the goblins to notice he was as good as free.
Whether he could take advantage of the matter, considering the poor shape he was in, was another question entirely.
The goblins dragged the hunters into a large interior room. The floor was covered in fresh rushes. There were no windows and all the light came from scores of smoky, guttering torches, sitting in braziers dotted around the room.
Tag had given up raving and concentrated on breathing instead, trying hard not to pass out again.
Apart from the multitude of torches, there was only one other piece of furniture in the room. A massive, wood and stone throne. On it sat one of the most obese beings Muller had ever set eyes on.
'Bow before king Globolb,' bellowed the hobgoblin who had dragged them in.
'What, you terminally stupid?' grunted Tag. 'How am I supposed to bow, I'm lying on the floor, tied to a freaking chair.'
The hobgoblin kicked Tag in the head again.
With a hiss of effort, the hugely obese king rose from his throne and stumped towards the two hunters. As he approached, Muller almost gagged, such was the stench emanating from him. Body odor, rotting food caught between stained teeth, and breath that would stun an ox at twenty paces.
'You came to murder me,' the king stated.
Muller was surprised at the massive hobgoblin's voice. Unlike his physical appearance, the voice was pure gold. Deep, stentorian, commanding and trustworthy. Even though the words themselves arrived on a reeking zephyr of foul air.
'For this, you shall be punished,' continued the king. 'Such will be the agony of your passing; generations of goblins will rejoice when told of the endless pain you suffered.'
Once again, Tag threw everything he had at his bonds. Muller could actually hear the metal in Tag's chains squeaking under the pressure. Then, as the big man flexed once more, the chair he was tied to shattered under the pressure.
But he was still tangled up in his chains.
Now was Muller's moment. Summoning his strength, he mentally put aside his pain, wriggled out of his chains, yanked them off the chair and swung them about his head First, he attacked the hobgoblin that had brought them to the king.
The hobgoblin was taken completely unawares as Muller surged forward and struck him. The heavy steel links smashed into his skull, knocking him to the floor. Muller followed with another swing for the

fences. The steel chain cracked into the hobgoblin's temple with such force it literally knocked his brains out of his ears.
Without pause, Muller attacked the rest of the goblins, his chain windmilling about him like some Stephen King version of a combine harvester.
Meanwhile, Tag had finally divested himself of his bonds and was frantically ripping out the score of arrows that were embedded in his flesh.
The king began screaming at the top of his voice, calling for help as he waddled to his throne and attempted to hide behind it.
Tag grabbed a length of chain and advanced on the screeching royal subject, a grin on his face.
'Well, what do you know, Jabba,' he said. 'Looks like things have just gone badly wrong for the ruling classes around here.'
'Stop,' howled the king. 'I pardon you. No need for all this violence, you are no longer guilty of attempted regicide. All is forgiven.'
'What about all the goblins rejoicing over the agony I was gonna suffer?'
'I spoke hastily.'
'Whatever,' responded the big man as he stepped forward, wrapped the chain around the king's neck and pulled.
King Globolb may have been a mite cowardly. And was most definitely way south of obesity, but he was also desperate and immensely strong. Both physically and odorously.
Using his immense weight, he rolled forward and pinned Tag between the throne and his gigantic body.
Tag took a deep breath and then gagged. 'Gross,' he gasped. 'You smell like you got skunk sprayed.'
The king pressed forward, confident that his vast poundage would eventually crush Tag.
And if Tag was a normal human being, he would have succeeded. But Tag was as far from normal as a Ferrari is from an East German Trabant.
Ignoring the stench, Tag pushed back and pulled even tighter on the chain. Then with a savage twist, he lifted his royal fatness off the floor, crushing his windpipe as he did so.
He held the king there for a few more seconds, shaking him back and forth like a huge terrier shaking an even huger rat.
Finally, the king spasmed, gave out a bubbling death rattle and went limp.
Tag dropped him and turned to help Muller. But there was no need. The Knight of the Holy See stood bowed, but not broken. Blood drenched his ripped clothes. Not only his own, but also from the many dead goblins that lay scattered about him.

‘Man,’ said Tag. ‘You came, you saw, and you kicked ass. Nice job.’
Muller waved Tag’s comment away. ‘We had better get going. I can hear more of them coming.’
Tag peered out of the room and into the corridor. ‘Yep, loads of them,’ he confirmed. ‘Better grab some weapons from the fallen, we got more fighting to do.’
Muller shook his head, picked up a short-sword, walked over to the silk back wall and sliced an opening in it. ‘Come on, let’s go,’ he urged Tag. ‘We just keep going in a straight line, away from wherever they are. I don’t have it in me to do any more fighting. I’m finished.’
‘Cool,’ agreed Tag. ‘Let’s get moving. I reckon when the little green dudes get here, they gonna slow down for a bit on account of the fact that the royal fat-boy has come over all dead like.’
The two friends slipped through the hole in the wall and started running through the rest of the royal dwelling, heading in a straight line. If they came to an obstacle, Tag either smashed through it, or they simply cut an opening in it.
They came across two goblin guards as they ran and Tag terminated them both with extreme prejudice. By the time they got to the wooden palisade that surrounded the royal camp, Tag was almost carrying Muller.
‘Come on, pious one,’ rumbled Tag. ‘Not long and we can take a rest.’
‘Bleeding out,’ mumbled Muller. ‘Maybe just leave me here for a while. I can get some rest. You go on ahead.’
‘No,’ said Tag.
‘Seriously, my friend,’ slurred Muller. ‘I can’t go on.’
With a slight grunt of effort, Tag picked the knight up in his arms and kept running, high stepping to get through the deep snow. He could hear the vague sounds of pursuit behind him, but after all the training that master Chu had forced him through, the buckets, the snow and the running, this was easy.
Well, not easy, but manageable.
In an effort to ensure the goblins didn’t catch up, Tag gritted his teeth and increased his speed. He was damned if he was gonna let those stinky little green guys kill him and his friend.
He’d rather die of exhaustion first.

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CHAPTER 43

Troy was correct. People tended not to look up unless they had some reason to.

And the two supernaturals gave them no reason as they ghosted across the rooftops towards their destination. After a few minutes, they were on the roof of one of the larger buildings.

Time to ingress.

To find the dwarves they were looking for.

And take them out of the equation.

The two of them lay on the roof for a few minutes while they listened to the occupants below. Finally, Emily pulsed a thought to Troy.

'Five of them. Two females. The girls are in a different room. The men are arguing, can't hear exactly what they're saying. Can you?'

'Something about a seam of gold and whether it's rich enough to open a new tunnel.'

'So, could be the Rock Master,' noted Emily. 'He's in charge of all of the mining operations.'

'Yeah,' responded Troy. 'But it could also be any bunch of dwarves talking about gold. I have noticed they tend to do that a lot.'

'Well, we have to play the percentages,' said Emily. 'How should we go in?'

'Swing down off the roof through the window. Simple.'

'Let's go,' agreed Emily. 'You lead.'

'Why?'

'Shock value. At first glance I'm just a girl.'

'Hardly,' interjected Troy.

'Whatever, you're a seven-foot tall, three-hundred-pound wolfman.'

Troy nodded and crawled over to the side of the roof where the window was. Without further ado, he grabbed the edge and leaped off, swinging hard as he did so.

The window wasn't open but he crashed through the glass with ease, tearing the frame off on his way.

Emily followed fast behind him.

Unfortunately, her prediction regarding Troy's effect on the occupants was incorrect.

If these had been normal people, humans, Fae or other, the sudden appearance of a large wolfman crashing into the room would have resulted in at least a few seconds of shocked incapacitation.

But these men were the leaders of a race of people that spent much of

their lives on the edge. Delving deep underground, risking rockfalls, gas explosions and nameless dark-dwelling monsters.
And they carried weapons with them at all times. Even indoors.
Their reaction to the intrusion was instantaneous.
Battle axes and warhammers cleaved the air as they all simultaneously struck at the wolfman. They ignored Emily because, as she had correctly anticipated, they perceived her as merely a girl. Because they hadn't actually bothered to look closely.
And that was a terminal error.
Calling forth her ax, Deathwalker, she blurred forward, blocking all three weapons with one lunging upward sweep. Then spinning fast, she lopped off one of the dwarf's arms, reversed her blow and, using the flat of the blade, knocked the other two out.
At the same time, Troy dispatched the wounded dwarf before he could cry out.
Such was the supernatural speed the two hunters moved; the entire scuffle was over in under two seconds.
Emily tore off the one dwarf's tunic, ripped it into strips, and bound and gagged the both of them. Then she slapped them both across the face until they came to.
They thrashed around as they surfaced, but Emily had made a good job of restraining them and she simply waited until they stopped. Then she gestured at Troy to question them.
'Right, my friends,' growled the wolfman. 'I need to ask a few questions. I will remove the gag from one of you and you will answer. If that person makes a noise, calls for help, or generally acts in a way I feel may endanger us, Emily will lop the other one's head off. Nod if you understand.'
Both dwarves nodded.
'Good. Who are you? By that, I mean, Mine master, Tunnel Master, Rock Master. And where are the rest of the clan leaders?'
He leaned down and took the one dwarf's gag off.
'Answer.'
The dwarf shook his head.
'If you don't,' growled Troy. 'I will chew your face off. Do you believe me?'
The dwarf nodded. 'I believe. But scare me you do not, wolf child. I live in the dark. Skull Crawlers, Basilisks, Driders and Mind Flayers have I fought. I have even seen a Balrog and survived. Have you ever seen one, wolf child? So, your worst do, betray our clan we shall not. Go ahead, death we do not fear.'
Troy took a deep breath. 'Oh well, I tried. Fine, I'm sorry, chap, if you aren't going to cooperate then I can't help you.'
The dwarf smirked.

Troy turned to Emily. ‘They’re yours,’ he said quietly. ‘Try not to make too much of a mess.’
Emily frowned at the wolf man, but she didn’t move.
Troy flicked his eyes towards the two dwarves and frowned back. He knew he didn’t scare them. But he also knew that if Emily let slip the darkness, she could terrify anyone, or anything. Even though she hated doing so. But they needed the dwarves to talk. It was essential to their mission.
He gestured again.
This time Emily reacted.
She ghosted across the room. And as she came towards them, she let loose the Daywalker. Her fangs elongated past her lips, reflecting the light like two blades of finest Toledo steel. The blood drained from her face, and her eyes flickered, obsidian with flashes of deepest red.
Blood red.
The air about her turned dark. As if she were sucking the life out of it.
‘You may not fear the dark,’ stated Troy softly. ‘But only the insane would not fear *becoming* the dark. Enjoy the rest of eternity as a *Nosferatu*. Or worse, a grinder.’
The dwarf shrank back. ‘No,’ he whispered. ‘Please. Have mercy. Not that. Anything but that.’
Emily peeled her lips back to further expose her fangs as she went down on one knee and stroked the dwarf’s neck. Her touch soft. Almost loving. Apart from her razor-sharp talons opening up a shallow wound as they caressed his jugular.
‘I am the Rock Master,’ shrieked the dwarf. ‘Over there is one of the Tunnel Masters. The dead man is another Tunnel Master. The third Tunnel Master lives in the house opposite. The Mine Captain lives across the square in the house with the blue door. Please, no vampires, I beg you.’
Troy pulled the gag off the second dwarf. ‘Is he telling the truth?’
Emily hissed, providing an exclamation point to Troy’s question.
‘Yes. All true. But please, don’t let her bite us. We would rather die.’
Emily stepped across to the second dwarf, and with a lightning-fast slash of her talons, she beheaded him. ‘Fine,’ she said. ‘In that case, I am happy to oblige.’
Spinning on her heel, she grasped the Rock Master by the neck, and with a single vicious twist, snapped it.
‘Emily,’ said Troy softly.
She turned to look at him, her face twisted in savage pleasure, her chest heaving, saliva glistened on her lips and fangs.
She hissed again. A sibilance of darkness and malevolence.
‘Calm down,’ said Troy. ‘It’s over.’
Emily looked down at the headless corpse, and up at the rich, red

blood that coated the floor and the walls. Then she walked up to Troy; her eyes filled with anger.
‘You SOB,’ she said. ‘You forced me to do that.’
Troy shook his head. ‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered. ‘I needed you to scare them.’
He flinched as he felt the power of Emily’s mind lash out at him, not in any attempt to hurt, merely an expression of her displeasure. He kept his face blank, his mind empty.
Non aggressive.
‘Don’t ever do that again without warning me,’ said Emily. ‘I’m serious.’
The wolfman hung his head, avoiding eye contact until the Daywalker calmed down.
After a few long seconds, Emily shook her head. Her fangs slowly receded, as did her talons. And her eyes reverted to a featureless black, as opposed to the blood laced obsidian nightmare of the last few moments.
She was still the Daywalker. But she was under control. Once again, she had accepted her inner darkness, welcomed it and put it to sleep.
Once again, she was almost all Emily.
‘Come on,’ she said, her voice slightly hoarse with emotion. ‘Let’s finish this.’

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CHAPTER 44

Troy and Emily had both gone full wolf, and they loped over the snow at top speed, mere blurs in the moonless dark.

They had dispatched the third Tunnel Master and the Mine Captain with ridiculous ease. Unfortunately, they had to kill two of the Mine Captain's guards as well. But it was acceptable collateral damage.

Then they exited via the same fissure they had gained access.

Now they were heading home as fast as possible.

There was no real physical need for Emily to change. Her Daywalker form allowed her to move just as swiftly as her wolven one, but Troy had insisted. Because he could feel her pain. Her disgust at herself and her inner darkness. And while she was in her human, or her Daywalker mode, there was nothing he could do to help her.

But once she went wolf, she was pack. And the pack only has one worry. How to serve the Alpha. And the Alpha's cared only about serving the Omega.

In return, the Alpha's and the Omega took on the pain of the pack. They shouldered their responsibilities, their doubts and their fears.

To live is to suffer. To suffer is to live.

Pack.

So now Emily was under his protection and her worries melted away.

Troywolf glanced over at her as she ran. And he could see the unfettered joy in her eyes. The delight at the feeling of the ice-cold snow on her paws. The enjoyment the crisp mountain air brought her. The delight she felt in her own speed and strength.

She was no longer merely, Emily.

She was Emilywolf.

She was pack.

She was content.

Troy exposed his teeth in a wolfy grin and increased his speed, heading back to the Fae camp.

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CHAPTER 45

Tag picked up the pot of his 'herbal' tea and poured himself a mugful. His hand shook slightly as he did so and some spilt on the table. Then he pushed the pot over to Emily. 'Tea,' he said. 'Drink some.'

Emily didn't react, she just sat and stared blankly at nothing. Withdrawn to the point that she was unresponsive.

Troy pulled the teapot towards himself and poured Emily a mug. Then he placed it in front of her, his face drawn with concern.

Merlin walked onto the bridge. Behind him, The Prof, Latobias, Belenas and Sirona.

'How is Muller?' asked the wizard.

Tag shrugged. 'On a drip. Sleeping. Not dead.'

'You did well to get him back,' continued Merlin. 'And you, are you okay?'

Again, the big man shrugged. 'Also, not dead.'

'I will go and check on him,' announced Sirona softly. 'I do have some healing skills.'

'I'll help,' added Belenas, as he followed her from the bridge.

Merlin walked over to the observation window. He stood looking out at the snowy vista as he packed his pipe. Latobias and the Prof sat at the table and helped themselves to some tea.

'Good news,' said Merlin after he had taken a toke on his pipe. 'The Mountain Dray clan are in total disarray. They have withdrawn their airships, and have shut down all communication with the goblins while they try to rebuild their leadership structure.

'Not that the goblins would notice as they have degenerated into full scale civil war while the different factions battle over the question of succession. In fact, many of them have left the finger and trekked back to their homeland. As we speak, the Fae armies are reclaiming the land the goblins invaded.

'And Latobias tells me that the portals are open once more. Obviously, the realm has decided the Winter Queen and her lands are safe. Order has been restored.

'All thanks to you people. Well done.'

No one reacted.

'So, as soon as we can, we're going home.'

'Yay,' said Tag, his voice dull, lackluster. 'About time, because, after careful contemplation, I have decided that this place sucks mightily.'

'Come on, then,' said Merlin with a chuckle. 'I'll get Quinton to

organize a stretcher for Muller and we shall be on our way. Back to the hideout for some serious R&R.'

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CHAPTER 46

The Krov Tsar leaned back in his chair and studied the old crone seated opposite him. She was not the first goddess he had met, but she was the one that commanded the most respect.

And it was the first time he had met her personally, even though, over his long life, he had served her, albeit inadvertently, many times, in many different wars.

'What is in it for me?' he asked.

'She is an enemy of yours as well,' answered the crone. 'I know for a fact you have already sent people to find her. I also know they have been unsuccessful.'

Belikov shrugged, the massive slabs of muscle straining against the cloth of his tailored suit. 'She is of no concern to me,' he said, waving his hand back and forth in dismissal. 'I have bigger things on my plate at the moment.'

'You talk of your search for the *Triginta*,' stated the crone.

Belikov raised an eyebrow in surprise. 'You know of that?'

'Obviously. And I can help. All I ask in return is the use of some of your soldiers.'

'Are you not strong enough on your own?' sneered the blood king.

The Morrigan stood up.

No longer was she the bent and wizened crone. Now she was a beautiful, statuesque Amazonian, her sable hair flowing about her like a living thing, her eyes crackling with power. 'Do not forget yourself, vampire,' she said, her voice like iron. 'Do not mistake my request for help as weakness. And to answer your question – in truth, I am not sure if I am strong enough to defeat the Daywalker. For she is not alone. She rides with the Omega, Myrddin Wyllt, the Professor, the Immortal and Muller the Pious.'

For the first time the Morrigan saw a flicker of emotion in Belikov's expression. Not quite fear. But something close. Perhaps, concern. Apprehension.

The massively deformed vampire stood up, spat in his right palm and held it out.

The Morrigan did the same, and they clasped hands.

'Allies,' rumbled Belikov.

'And friends,' added the Morrigan with a smile.

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CHAPTER 46

‘You know,’ said Tag. ‘In Jamaica we have a saying – *After a storm there are always coconuts to pick up*.’
‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ questioned Muller.
‘It’s another way of saying, *every cloud has a silver lining*,’ interjected Emily. ‘Although I’m not sure if it actually pertains to us right now. Perhaps, *all’s well that ends well*, would be more apt.’
‘But it’s not the end,’ noted Troy. ‘At least, not yet.’
Muller stood up. ‘That’s right, it isn’t. So, enough R&R, let’s go kill vampires.’
‘It’s not over until the fat lady sings,’ added Tag.
Muller frowned. ‘Really? You couldn’t just leave me with the whole, let’s go kill vampire’s thing? You had to ruin it by adding fat ladies?’
‘Sorry.’
‘No worries,’ said Muller. ‘After all, you did save my life.’
‘Damn right I did,’ said Tag. ‘Now – let’s go kill some vampires.’

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Book 8 CONFLICT

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CHAPTER 1

Tag stretched, throwing his arms wide as he reveled in the morning sun and the balmy air.

The team refused to stay at Merlin's freezing mountain hideaway after they returned from the lands of the Winter Fae.

They all universally agreed – no more frigging snow.

Quinton had gone a step further and sworn that he never even wanted to see ice again, unless it was in cubes and floating in whisky.

So, Merlin had gotten Latobias to fly them to another of his multitudes of residences. This one, a huge sprawling villa situated a few miles outside of the city of Prizna in Croatia. And although the country wasn't exactly known for long temperate summers, it was decidedly warmer than the Alps.

Tag finished his tea and went back inside, heading for the kitchen to fix himself another mug of his super-sweet, highly dubious brew.

As was the team's usual custom, the kitchen was once again the hub of all activity. An informal common room where all gathered around the vast oak table.

At the moment, the entire team, excluding the Legionnaires but including Quinton, were there.

Including Father Marko Novak, a grizzled old priest from the local parish. Long gray beard. Watery blue eyes, tall and skinny to the point of emaciation. A voice that boomed loudly even when he thought he was talking quietly.

He was currently bemoaning the new rules passed down by papal edict. The new orders severely curtailed the powers and scope of the Knights of the Holy See.

The Pope had declared that belief in Vampires, Ghouls and Werewolves constituted a sin. And as Roman Catholic doctrine states the pope is ineffable and cannot err in matters of faith or morals, it followed that obviously these supernatural creatures could not exist.

Therefore, because the Knights of the Holy See were formed purely to hunt down vampires and other such evil manifestations, they no longer had a job. Or even a reason to exist as a unit. The cardinals had solved this problem by changing the Knights charter. They had reduced them to mere bodyguards for the upper echelons of the Vatican. Glorified chauffeurs and baby sitters.

'It is madness,' bellowed Father Novak. 'The last few months have seen a marked increase in vampiric activity, as well as demonic

possessions, demon sightings and worse. Even though they all no longer officially exist, bless his holy name. Amen.'

'Amen,' echoed Muller. 'May he ever serve.'

'Live long and prosper,' mumbled Tag, flinching slightly as Emily kicked him under the table and shook her head.

'Anyway,' continued the old priest. 'You can imagine my joy when I discovered none other than Muller the Pious residing right here, in my very own parish. The last of the proper Knights of the Holy See.'

'Father,' interjected Muller. 'I am not sure if I am still a member of that most holy of orders. It has been many months since I was last even in contact with any officers of the papacy. In fact, I have heard rumors that the cardinals, may the Lord bless them, have disavowed me and revoked my titles.'

Father Novak shook his head in denial. 'No, my son. They cannot. Only the pope could do that. And he would not. You are the only living being to have been awarded both *the Supreme Order of Christ* and *the Order of Saint Sylvester and the Golden Militia*. By right, any holder of those two orders is to be regarded as the left hand of the Pope, and none but the Holy Father can sunder that truth.'

'Surely you mean the right hand?' asked Troy.

'No,' denied Father Novak. 'The son sits at the right hand. But at the left sits Gabriel. The sword of God. Thus is Muller given that position as a soldier of the Lord.'

'Yeah, all getting a bit heavy, holy dude,' interjected Tag. 'We all know that Muller is a righteous SOB. Anyway, what can we do you for?'

The priest cleared his throat, took a sip of tea and continued. 'For a while now, I have known of a minor nest of vampires. They rule a small village in the Dinara mountain range, some twenty miles from here. Obviously, I informed the Vatican, but with the new father's decree…'

'Bless his name,' interjected Muller.

'Yes,' agreed Father Novak. 'Long may he reign and so on.'

Tag rolled his eyes.

'As, I was saying,' continued the priest. 'With the new rules, my requests for help were not only denied, I was given an official warning to refrain from spouting such blasphemous lies, and ordered to fast and pray for penance.'

'Idiots,' snapped Merlin, as he conjured a map out of the ether and unrolled it on the table. 'Can you show us where this village is, Father?'

The priest frowned at the wizard's casual insult against the powers that be at his church, even though he did actually agree with him. Then he ran his finger along the parchment and stabbed at a small dot

that demarcated a village.

‘There, the village of Brak.’

‘How many vamps would you say?’

The priest sighed. ‘You see, this is the problem. When I first reported the news to the church, there were but three, maybe four of the monsters there. They controlled the village and had done for many years. On the whole, they stuck to their own self-imposed boundaries and fed without killing, treating their familiars as cattle. Or maybe even as beloved pets.

‘Now, however, things have changed. Reports are their numbers have swelled to ten, maybe even a score. They have instituted a reign of terror over the surrounding area, kidnapping innocents, murdering and maiming. Until you came, I fear I was at my wits end as to what to do next.’

‘Fear no longer, Father,’ said Emily. ‘We will bring an end to this. Tomorrow, we ride.’

The old priest bowed his head in thanks as the team stood up and went to prepare for the next day’s hunt.

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CHAPTER 2

Arend smirked. He had done a remarkable job thus far, even if he had to say so himself. And he did, because there was on one else who gave a crap about his feelings.

'Remer,' he called out, before remembering his male Fae battlemage assistant was actually no more, having fallen foul of some minor god or other. Arend had never bothered to figure out who it was that actually brought about his assistant's untimely demise. What was the point? He was gone and now Arend was being inconvenienced by the idiot's death.

'Umm, Remer's gone, boss,' stated Mist.

'What are you?' snapped Arend. 'A professor of the bleeding obvious? I know he's gone, I'm not grotesquely stupid. Unlike you, you moron.'

'Yes, boss,' simpered Mist, his second, no, now his only assistant. 'Do you miss him? I do. A bit.'

Arend sneered. 'Don't be absurd, that would be like missing a hammer. It's an inconvenience, that's all. Look, tell you what, why don't you take a couple of days off? We've just delivered the twenty-eighth piece of the *Triginta* to the Blood King and to be honest, I feel we both deserve a break. Me more than you, obviously, but needs must as they say.'

'Thanks, boss. What should I do?'

'What do you mean?'

'With my time off. I've never had time off. What do you do with it?'

Arend sighed. 'I really have no idea what a simpleton like you would do with their spare time. Go fishing? Read a book? I don't care, just make sure I don't see or hear you for the next forty-eight hours. Now begone.'

Mist bowed deeply and left the room, leaving Arend alone to indulge in a little more serious self-congratulating.

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The row of elder vampires took a knee in front of Belikov and averted their eyes. Wearing heavy leather gauntlets, Jebe lifted the newly constructed chain consisting of twenty-eight of the thirty pieces of silver, and placed it around the Blood King's neck. He lay it carefully on top of the thick silk scarf, there to ensure none of the accursed

metal made contact with the king's skin. Because although the Triginta imparted great power, the silver metal was still an anathema to the *Nosferatu* and its slightest touch would burn like acid.

Belikov's eyes flashed red as he threw his head back and shrieked out loud, giving voice to his delight. Vocalizing the waves of power that washed over him as the *Triginta* imbued him with its strength. Its passion. Its influence. Its magic.

And its curse.

He faced his followers and smiled; his mouth wide open in a deformed parody of joy. His fangs glistened and tiny strings of saliva laced his open mouth. He sniffed the air before he spoke, and when he did, each word rang with conviction. The power of absolute belief throbbed with every utterance. Every syllable another step towards elevation.

He was their leader, and more. And they were his to command, whatever the order and whatever the cost.

For with almost all of the *Triginta* with him, Belikov was as close to a god as one could be without actual deification.

He spoke to them of power. Of the *Nosferatu's* rightful place as kings of all of the earth. He told of the riches, both mental and material they would all command. He showed them the way and preached to them the gospel of Belikov.

Humans are our cattle.

They are mere rungs on the food chain and we are the apex of all that has and will ever be.

And as the power of the *Triginta* washed over the assembled elders, it drew the scales of evil over their eyes, cajoling them and caressing them with the Blood King's litany of insanity. Preventing them from seeing anything but what Belikov wanted.

Except for Hadad, who shuddered at the sight of his king's obvious and undeniable insanity.

Tears of blood began to flow from Belikov's eyes as his rant continued. The *Nosferatu* present were in almost paroxysms of joy and self-belief. This was their king. Their god.

Their everything.

And it took all of Hadad's mental prowess to prevent himself from crawling on his hands and knees to present the Blood King with the piece of the *Triginta* he had so far kept hidden.

But he prevailed.

Barely.

And as the *Krov Tsar* swept from the room on a tidal wave of adulation, Hadad sighed with relief, his hands shaking as he realized just how close it had been.

How close he had come to the true death.

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CHAPTER 3

The village of Brak was an achingly beautiful, chocolate box spread of thatched and timbered houses. It nestled in a shallow valley, overlooked by towering peaks and embraced by thick forest.

A single dirt track wound its way along the valley to the village itself. To the left, a fast-running stream gurgled and bubbled its way past the houses. Everything about it spoke of a rural idyll.

Except for the corpses.

They were stacked in the village square like so much cordwood.

And it was obvious they had been fed from. Throats ripped open, chunks of flesh torn from legs, arms and faces. Expressions of terror etched on their faces, frozen in rigor mortis.

Tag started to speak, but his voice cracked with emotion. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, swiping away the tears that ran unashamedly down his cheeks.

'Children,' he croaked. 'The bastards. It looks like they tortured them before they fed. Why?'

Emily shook her head. 'No idea. It makes no sense. They wiped out the entire village and left.'

'We will find them,' stated Quinton. 'As God is my witness, we shall not rest until we have put an end to these monsters.'

There was a mutter of agreement from the rest of the Legionnaires.

Troy nodded. 'Right, Emily and I will go wolf, we'll take the spoor, that vampire stench will be easy to track. You lot follow. These murdering assholes are toast. There's no way they're getting away.'

Troy and Emily morphed into full wolf mode, sniffed the air and started running.

The hunt was on.

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CHAPTER 4

‘It seems rather excessive,’ said Jebe. ‘I’m going to have to think about it.’

‘No,’ snapped the Morrigan. ‘You do not have to think about anything, apart from how soon you can do as I bid.’

Jebe frowned, but before he could voice his disagreement, the Morrigan continued.

‘Did not your king instruct you to accommodate me in every way possible? Were you not ordered to help me in my quest to eliminate that disgusting female and her entourage?’

Jebe nodded reluctantly, fighting to keep his expression neutral.

‘Well then,’ continued the Morrigan. ‘Do as you were told.’

‘I will do as my king instructed,’ affirmed Jebe. ‘However, even though he told me to help you, he did not tell me to obey your every whim without thought or discussion. You are asking me to commit a serious quantity of resources to combat a mere handful of people. As I said, it seems excessive. I would recommend sending a smaller force. Perhaps ten strong. One Chernobyl elder at most. The rest of the force made up of some of our younger brethren. Perhaps a few Grinders as well if you foresee the need for some cannon fodder.’

The Morrigan, who was currently in her wizened old crone form, morphed into her siren mode as she stepped towards Jebe. Her sable hair cascaded to her waist; her deep scarlet dress clung to her lithe body. Her eyes crackled with inner power, two obsidian orbs, like portholes to the abyss. And from her back spread the shadowy suggestion of two massive crow’s wings.

Jebe took an involuntary step backwards, truly comprehending for the first time exactly who he was facing.

‘You dare to offer me advice on how to conduct warfare?’ breathed the Morrigan, the softness of her speech belying the threat the words contained. ‘You pathetic child. I am Mor-Rioghain. I am Badb Catha, Macha and Nemain. I am the one and the three. The triple goddess of war, witchcraft and death.

‘I drove the Fomorians into the sea a thousand, thousand years before you even existed. I have fought more battles and been responsible for more deaths than every *Nosferatu* combined.

‘And you presume to give me advice.’

Jebe dropped to one knee and bowed his head. ‘Forgive me, goddess,’ he said. ‘I see now that I overstepped my boundaries.’

The Morrigan stared at the deformed elder vampire for a full ten seconds before she took a step back. 'Rise,' she told him. 'Although there is no need for me to do so, I will explain. Are you aware who we seek to vanquish?'

Jebe shrugged. 'Some werewolves and a few soldiers, I think.'

The Morrigan laughed. 'So, you have no idea. You look to offer advice even though you have zero information from which to glean it.' The goddess shook her head. 'You are even more pathetic than I suspected. Nevertheless, I continue. The group we seek to destroy consists of, Myrddin Wyllt, wizard to the court of King Arthur and more. He is joined by the Professor. You may know him as the Boggart of Grizlehurst. A dabbler in magical potions and arcane construction. A genius, and an obsessive and an extremely dangerous opponent.

The Omega of all of the European packs. A young werewolf who has already proven himself in countless battles. With him, the man known as the Immortal and his friend, Muller the Pious, Knight of the Holy See.'

Jebe flinched at the news of the Knight. He was infamous amongst the *Nosferatu* as the only man in living memory who could actually wield Holy Water with enough faith to turn it into a weapon.

'Add to this group, a squad of French Foreign Legionnaires, highly trained and extremely driven individuals who will fight to the death rather than surrender.

'And, finally, the Daywalker.'

The Morrigan noted Jebe's frown and she smiled, an expression devoid of humor. 'I see, you doubt me.'

'No, goddess,' denied the vampire. 'I do not doubt the Daywalker exists. I merely doubt she is all they say she is. Whoever, they might be.'

'She exists,' snarled the Morrigan. 'And she is more than they say she is. That vile bitch is deadly beyond belief. She is vampire, she is werewolf, she is Pack, ax-wielder and Gargoyle commander. She is the Daywalker, and your greatest warrior would be unable to best her.

'So, now you see why I demand you array such a substantial force against them.'

'I do, goddess,' conceded Jebe. 'And I shall comply. I will get one of the brethren to acquire an Antonov cargo plane immediately, we shall need something very large to accommodate your request. And I will begin rounding up the brethren as soon as I can.'

'Sooner,' snapped the Morrigan. 'I have already instituted the first stage of my plan. And they have taken the bait. I need this to happen in hours, not days.'

Jebe bowed deeply. 'As you command, so shall it be.'

The Morrigan smiled, leaned forward and pinched the monster's

cheek. ‘Good boy,’ she purred.

Then she morphed into the form of a huge crow and, with barely a beat of her wings, flew from the building.

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CHAPTER 5

‘Snow again,’ muttered Tag. ‘I swear, I must be cursed.’

‘We’re high up,’ said Quinton. ‘High mountains got snow on them.’

‘I know,’ answered Tag. ‘Just my luck that the vamps had to hightail it to some place above the snow line. Also, I thought we’d catch them in a few hours. It’s been two friggin days now and I ate all my grub on the second day.’

‘We told you not to,’ interjected Emily.

‘Yeah, you did. But when I saw the snow, I got depressed. And when I get depressed, I like to eat. So, I ate all my chow.’

Emily delved into her pack and threw the big man a candy bar. ‘Here.’

Tag grinned. ‘Hey, thanks, girly. You guys see that?’ he addressed the rest of the team. ‘Emily just gave me some nourishment on account of me dying of hunger. Maybe you dudes could show Tag some love as well.’

There was a slight pause, and then Tag had to duck out of the way as the Legionnaires peppered him with full tins of food from their Combat Rations or RCRI packs.

Tag managed to dodge most of them, but a particularly good pitch from Quinton struck him on the forehead.

‘Ouch.’ He leaned down and picked up the offending tin. ‘Cassoulet,’ he read. ‘What’s that?’

‘Stew,’ answered Quinton. ‘With confit duck legs, sausage and beans. It’s good.’

The big man collected up the rest of the tins, reading the contents out aloud before stashing them in his rucksack.

‘Navarin. What’s that?’

‘Lamb stew,’ answered Quinton.

‘Chicken Parisienna?’

‘Chicken stew.’

‘Veal Marengo?’

‘Stew.’

‘Mutton flageoletes?’

‘Stew.’

‘Hey, I know this one,’ beamed Tag as he read the last tin. ‘Beef Bourguignon. That’s French stew. Cool, I like stew.’

‘Well, now you got loads of it,’ quipped Quinton.

Troy held his clenched fist up and the team stopped. Suddenly alert,

senses stretched, nerves tight.

The Omega sniffed the air then turned to Emily. ‘Can you smell it?’

Emily nodded. ‘Woodsmoke.’

‘Yep, but behind that. Very faint.’

Emily took a deep breath and concentrated. Then she shuddered. ‘Vampire. Almost not there.’

‘I’d guess maybe fifteen miles away. Behind the next peak. Come on, let’s get moving.’

Troy and Tag broke the way, beating a path through the deep snow to help the rest of the team move forward at pace without exhausting themselves.

Tag slowed down momentarily while he pulled the top off one of his tins and chugged the cold stew without actually missing a step.

‘Elegant,’ grunted Muller.

‘Hungry,’ replied the big man.

‘Slow down,’ said Troy. ’We’re getting close. Keep quiet, sound travels in the mountains and the bloodsuckers can hear a flea fart at a hundred paces.’

Tag chuckled and was about to make a comment when Muller held a finger to his lips.

The big man nodded and looked sheepish. ‘Gotta keep quiet,’ he said in his usual loud stage whisper.

The team continued moving forward. But now Troy had gone full wolf and ranged ahead, looking for possible sentries or scouts. Even though the sun was still up, preventing the blood suckers from roaming freely, there were always familiars to worry about.

Soon they broached the peak of the next mountain and looked down on the village. Although the streets seemed deserted, smoke rose lazily from a few of the chimneys, evidencing there was probably life there.

‘This is it,’ whispered Troy.

Emily nodded her agreement. ‘I can smell their fetid stench from here.’

‘Now the question is, have they taken the village by force, or is it owned by them?’ asked Quinton.

‘I can’t smell fresh blood, and there aren’t any signs of a struggle in the streets. Well, not anything readily apparent,’ mused Troy.

‘But if they aren’t being subjugated,’ interjected Emily. ‘One would think at least a couple of villagers would be out and about. I know it’s close to sundown, but the place is suspiciously quiet.’

‘Don’t matter,’ grunted Tag. ‘Those mothers killed all the little kiddies, so me and missus Jones are going to tear them to pieces.’

‘Agreed,’ growled Troy.

‘I suggest we do some serious reconnoitering first,’ said Quinton. ‘Keep a watch over the place for at least a day. Scout the entire area,

check things out before we commit.'

'No time for that crap,' said Tag. 'There's killing needs to be done.'

Quinton shook his head. 'At least wait until the morning. No need to attack vampires at night.'

Troy and Tag reluctantly agreed.

'Good,' stated Quinton. 'Let's pull back, get some food in us. I'll set the guard and do a quick recce.'

'Be careful,' said Emily. 'Don't push your luck, especially after the sun goes down. If you get too close, the vamps will smell you and it'll take away our element of surprise. So, do your recce if you must, but stay away from the village.'

Quinton nodded, but it was obvious from his expression he did not approve of carrying out the operation with so little intel. 'Fine,' he said. 'You're the boss.'

The team pulled back into an area of thick forest and bed down for the night.

Tag ate all of his tins of various stews, burped happily and rolled himself up in a sleeping bag, snuggling up with missus Jones.

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CHAPTER 6

‘I don’t like this,’ whispered Quinton.

‘Why? As you said, your recce last night didn’t reveal anything untoward,’ answered Emily.

‘I know,’ admitted the Commandant. ‘It’s just a feeling. The place is too quiet. I see smoke coming from the chimneys, but can’t hear anyone. And the smoke kept coming all night. It’s still there. It seems wrong. Why keep a fire going twenty-four-seven? Why aren’t any other cottages starting a fire. It’s almost sunrise, in these rural environs, that’s meant to be breakfast time.’

‘Dude, don’t sweat it,’ interjected Tag. ‘We know what’s there. A bunch of vamps, most likely a group of familiars. Troy said he thinks he smelled some Grinders. Nothing we haven’t come up against before. We bad, we armed and we’se gonna kill us a heap-load of blood suckers.’

Quinton shrugged. ‘Sure, you’re right. Just nerves, I guess. Let’s do it.’

‘That’s my man,’ grinned Tag as he cocked missus Jones and got to his feet.

The plan was simple. Emily split the hunters into three teams.

She led one, with Quinton, and three other Legionnaires.

Troy led the next with three more soldiers.

And Tag, Muller and the last three Legionnaires formed the final team.

They aimed to enter the village from separate directions and then simply search house-to-house, neutralizing any enemy they came across and, hopefully, releasing any prisoners the vamps may have incarcerated.

They synchronized watches and split up, aiming to enter the village at the same time.

Troy went wolfman and Emily allowed her Daywalker side to achieve ascendency as they moved into the confines of the village.

As the sun broke the horizon, the teams hit the first cottages, working quickly but stealthily. Opening doors or windows to ingress as silently as possible, searching the rooms and backing out.

After three cottages, Emily knew Quinton was correct.

There was something badly wrong here.

She pulsed a mental query to Troy via their pack link. ‘Find anything?’

‘No,’ he answered. ‘But their stink is everywhere. I can smell them in the houses, but there’s no one there.’

‘Basements?’ asked Emily.

‘I can feel a void under the houses, like a cave or something. Could just be a natural cavern or something, because there’s no access. No trapdoors. Nothing. Let’s meet on the village green, see if we can figure this out.’

‘Will do, I’ll radio Muller and tell him.’

Less than a minute later, the hunters stood together. Tag and Muller had likewise found nothing.

‘I vote we pull back,’ said Quinton. ‘My gut is screaming that something’s wrong.’

‘Well, duh,’ chuckled Tag. ‘We knows that something isn’t right. Where the vamps at? Missus Jones wants to party.’

Troy sniffed the air again and growled. ‘They’re here.’

‘Where?’ asked Muller. ‘We’ve checked the houses.’

‘No, not all of them,’ replied Troy. ‘Let’s stick together, go through the ones we haven’t done yet. Starting with the village hall. It’s a big place, maybe they’re all there.’

The team followed Troy as he stalked back through the village.

As they approached the village hall, the fur on Troy’s back stood up and he let out an involuntary growl. ‘They’re somewhere close,’ he said. ‘Stay frosty.’

Quinton peered through the windows on the side of the hall and shook his head. ‘Seems empty.’

‘Muller pushed the front doors open and then stepped in and to the side, to prevent himself being framed in the opening.

Tag followed.

The two of them scoped the room out, then beckoned for Emily and Troy to enter while the rest of the team kept watch.

Both Emily and Troy were hit with the rotten meat and acetone smell of the vampire as soon as they entered.

Troy growled and called the Legionnaires into the hall. ‘They’re here,’ he said. ‘Obviously not in the room, but real close. Check for trapdoors, hidden exits, anything that looks suspicious. We’re not leaving until we sort this out.’

The team spread out and began lifting benches and tables, rapping on walls and pulling up floorboards.

Finally, Tag called out. ‘Over here.’ He tapped the wall behind the lectern. ‘Sounds hollow.’

Everyone rushed over and started prodding and banging on the wall. Some of the Legionnaires took out their bayonets and stabbed at the lectern and the plastered area.

‘Hey,’ snapped Emily. ‘Get back. Man, you’re like a bunch of

impatient kids sometimes,' she tempered the harsh words with a smile. 'Settle down, let me take a careful look. Muller, I presume you know a bit about secret passageways and such, from your experience in the Vatican.'

Muller grinned. 'That I do,' he admitted. 'The place was riddled with them.' He stepped forward and began his search.

Ten minutes later, he gave a chuckle of pleasure. 'Got it. Here, look,' he called Emily over. 'In this part of the carving in the side of the lectern. See how much shiner it is than the rest of the carving? Now, if I'm right.' He pushed at the said pattern, and with an audible click it slid into the carving.

Then the floor began to vibrate,

'Get ready,' commanded Troy.

With a harsh grinding sound, the lectern sank slowly into the floor. At the same time, the central isle of the hall began to slope downwards, causing everyone to rush to the sides of the building.

Slowly, the ramp sank downwards as the lectern disappeared below the floor. After a few seconds of grating and rumbling, the mechanism stopped to reveal a steep incline that led down into pitch darkness.

'Well, there goes any hope of a surprise attack,' quipped Quinton.

'I'll lead,' said Emily as she let more of her Daywalker side leak through.

'Cool,' acknowledged Troy. 'Right behind you. Guy's, wait until we give the all-clear.'

Emily's eyesight cut through the darkness with ease. And after a couple of seconds, she realized the area wasn't quite as dark as she had at first thought. The floor and walls seemed to be covered in some form of luminescent lichen. Causing the whole area to shimmer slightly with a gray, graveyard glimmer.

'Advance,' called out Troy.

The rest of the team came down the ramp, weapons hot, senses on full alert.

They moved forward, further into the cavern, and as they did, the full splendor of the underground space became visible.

'Wow,' breathed Emily. 'It's huge.'

'It's a friggin town,' noted Tag. 'Like *Pareen*, or *Romeen*. But a cruddy, broken down, dead version. Also, smaller. I'm not impressed. Hey, how come I can see?'

'Some sort of bioluminescence,' answered Emily. 'You get it in fungi, rotting wood. Sometimes even putrescent flesh.'

'Gross,' said Tag. 'Puke powered illuminations. Yuck.'

'I know what this place is,' interjected Muller, his voice tinged with awe. 'We studied this in Vatican history classes. Almost a thousand years ago, Croatia was involved in the Ottoman-Hungarian conflict. A

bloody war that lasted two-hundred-and-fifty years. Many small villages lived in such fear of constant raids that lots of them were rumored to have carved out dwelling units underground. They lived in them for over a hundred years, venturing out only to gather food or tend to hidden crops or cattle. But this is the first of such size I have either seen or heard of. It's much larger than the village above.'

'Yeah,' growled Troy. 'And it's full of vamps. Also, humans. I can smell them.'

'There,' yelled Tag.

The team swiveled as one.

Troy shook his head. 'Can't see anything.'

'Something moved,' insisted Tag. 'Way over there, in the distance.'

The team moved forward, walking further into the cavern, straining to see any movement amongst the shadows.

'Should I light a flare?' asked Quinton.

Emily shook her head. 'Negative. It would ruin our night vision.'

Before Quinton could react, a loud grating sound echoed through the cavern, and the entrance ramp rose back up, sealing the entrance with a solid thump.

As the entrance slammed shut, a loud, insane screech rent the air.

First one, then two, then many. Gibbering and shrieking.

'Well, that's not good,' said Muller.

Fast moving shadows flitted between the buildings and the insane screeching got even louder.

'Grinders,' said Troy. 'Heaps of them.'

Tag swiveled fast and opened up, missus Jones stitching a line of fire across the mob of Grinders. The muzzle flash and tracer rounds lit the area up to the extent that most of the shadows were momentarily reduced, revealing the scores of Grinders and vampires standing in and around the buildings.

'There's hundreds of them,' gasped Emily.

'BUMF's,' bellowed Tag. 'There, up on the roof.'

He turned missus Jones on them, spraying the flat rooftop with a couple of hundred rounds. Clay and stones flew off the structure as the minigun disintegrated the ancient structure in a hail of fire.

But the five Chernobyl vampires leaped from the building, moving so fast it looked like they had teleported, escaping the onslaught completely unscathed.

'It's a trap,' yelled Muller.

'Oh, you think,' snapped Tag as he put a couple more bursts into the advancing horde of slobbering, keening Grinders.

'Grenades,' commanded Quinton.

The Legionnaires each took out a brace of silver-laced hand grenades and hurled them at the Grinders. The resulting explosions

were deafening, but the result was spectacular. Killing, maiming and, more importantly, driving the Grinders into paroxysms of anger. They began to turn on each other, simply looking to tear and rend anything around them

Which was the biggest problem with the brain-fried *unter*-vamps.

'Behind us,' warned Emily as she conjured her ax, Deathwalker into her hands.

Troy spun around to see a score of vampires running towards them. They had obviously been hiding in the various houses the team had passed as the entered the underground town. And now the trap had been sprung, they were attacking.

Both Troy and Emily ran to meet them.

'Where the BUMF's at?' shouted Tag. 'Don't let those mothers sneak up on us.'

Muller fired at the Grinders and then reloaded, eyes scanning the cavern, searching for the Chernobyl vamps.

The vampires who had attacked from the rear were taken by surprise at the ferocity of Troy and Emily's counterattack. Having fought together so often, and always against serious odds, their combined combat style was more akin to dancing that fighting.

Moving together, covering each other's backs, providing openings the other could take advantage of. A whirring windmill of ax, teeth, claws and fangs.

But they were outnumbered ten-to-one. Odds even they were finding difficult.

And then the five Chernobyl vamps appeared, coming in from the left, and with them, another ten *Nosferatu,* even more Grinders and a crowd of heavily armed familiars.

'Tag, Muller,' shouted Quinton. 'Fall back. Both of you help Troy and Emily. We need to get back to the ramp, see if we can get out of here.'

Both Tag and Muller turned and ran to boost Emily and Troy's counterattack. Tag used missus Jones as judiciously as he could, conserving ammunition, but at the same time dealing out as much damage as he could.

Muller and his joint attack, added to Troy and Emily's dance of death, broke the remaining vampires, cutting them down and visiting the true death on all of them.

'Path is clear,' yelled Muller.

'Find a way to activate the ramp,' returned Quinton as he directed five of his men to concentrate their fire on the fast-approaching Chernobyl vamps and their reinforcements, while the others continued to fire at the Grinders.

More grenades filled the air with fire and silver and steel, and the

sound of automatic gunfire almost drowned out the savage screeching of the Grinders as they kept coming forward, knowing neither fear nor any form of self-preservation.

Muller checked frantically for the hidden switch that would open their escape route.

'Hey, running out of ammo and time here,' stated Tag.

'Yeah, not helping,' muttered Muller as he ran his hand along a carved wooden panel next to the area where the lectern had descended.

'Got it.' Muller breathed a sigh of relief as a section of the carving clicked into place and the rumble of the descending ramp filled the air.

'Come on, Quinton,' yelled Emily. 'Pull back.'

The commander turned to look at her, then he shook his head and smiled. 'No can do, my friend,' he shouted back. 'We'll cover you. Now move it.'

The Commandant directed his men to increase their rate of fire, and at the same time he threw his last two grenades at the Chernobyl monsters and their brethren. But their concerted fire was merely slowing the approaching *Nosferatu* down. Even full bursts to the chest only caused the Chernobyl vampires to stagger slightly and then they kept coming.

And Quinton knew, if he and his men turned and ran, the rest of the team would surely die.

And he could not allow that to happen.

Not on his watch.

'No,' shouted Emily as she began to run to help.

But two pairs of strong hands held her back as both Tag and Troy grabbed her.

'Let's go, girly,' said Tag gruffly. 'Quinton and his boys are sacrificing themselves for us. Don't insult him by making it all for nothing.'

Quinton took one last look at them as they ran up the ramp, he grinned again and waved. Then he turned back toward the incoming *Nosferatu* and the remaining Grinders.

Behind him, the ramp ground shut as Muller hit the lever in the town hall and then jammed it closed with a dagger.

'Honor and fidelity,' bellowed Quinton.

'To the last one,' roared his men in return.

'Let's kill these crap-eaters,' he yelled. 'Charge.'

Roaring their battle cries, the Legionnaires ran forwards.

To honor.

To glory.

To death.

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CHAPTER 7

Merlin stared at Emily and Troy; his azure eyes filled with anger. And disappointment.

Emily sniffed and wiped tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand. She had just told the wizard of their disastrous excursion, and the infinite sadness they all felt at the loss of their brave comrades.

'What the hell were you thinking?' asked Merlin, the softness of his voice belying the sternness of his question.

'It was a trap,' answered Emily. 'They set us up from the very beginning. The dead children, the trail, the fake village.'

'Yes,' agreed Merlin. 'A trap that should have been obvious to anyone with half a brain.'

'It was the kiddies,' interjected Tag. 'When we saw their little bodies, all eaten up and broken like that, we stopped thinking. All we wanted was to kill the asswipes that did it.'

Merlin shook his head. 'So, none of you thought to stop and question things?'

Troy shuffled his feet, his face drawn with grief. 'To be honest,' he admitted. 'Quinton did say we were jumping the gun.'

'So, in your wisdom, you decided to ignore a highly skilled veteran, and just go right ahead. And because of that, ten good men died.'

'It wasn't like that,' blurted Emily with a sob. 'It wasn't our fault.'

'It was your fault,' roared Merlin.

'Settle down, Myrddin,' said the Prof gently, using the wizards ancient Celtic name. 'They are young, their keenness to do justice caused this.'

'Are you saying they are blameless?'

The Prof shook his head. 'No, all of them must shoulder the blame. And they will have to live with the knowledge for the rest of their lives. But they all know that. Screaming at them won't do any good.'

Merlin closed his eyes for a few moments. Then he stepped forward and grasped Emily by the shoulders. 'That could have been you, left down there with those blood suckers. All of you.' He shook his head. 'I seriously don't know if I could take that. Please, learn from this. Temper your next rush into the abyss with some caution. If you don't, you will surely not last another year. These forces we are dealing with are far stronger than anything we have come up against before.'

'You do realize who is behind this?' questioned the Prof.

Merlin nodded. 'It has her signature all over it.'

‘All over what? Who?’ asked Emily.

‘The Morrigan,’ answered Merlin. ‘The *Nosferatu* would not have plotted such a convoluted plan. Nor, I suspect, would they have used such unbelievably overwhelming numbers. They believe themselves to be, quite rightly I must add, the most formidable of combatants. No, the Crow Woman must have convinced them of the need to set such an ambush. They have no special interest in you apart from the usual hatred all *Nosferatu* have for any Shadowhunter. Particularly one who walks the day.’

‘That bitch is going down,’ growled Tag. ‘Missus Jones is gonna stitch her up, big time.’

‘Not if I see her first,’ vowed Emily.

Both Merlin and the Prof nodded their agreement.

‘Now go, rest. Then we will meet for supper,’ said Merlin as he left the room, heading for his study. Beckoning to the Prof, he called him. ‘Come with me, we have some spells to work on. We need to track that harridan down.’

Tag went over to the stove and put the kettle on. Troy, Emily and Muller sat down at the table.

A few minutes later he placed the full mugs in front of everyone, then without asking he took out a flask of dark rum and poured a generous slug into each brew.

No one complained.

The big man picked up his mug and toasted.

‘The Legion.’

The rest of the team raised their mugs and repeated his toast.

‘We have to call on the packs,’ said Emily after everyone had taken a few sips of their high-octane tea.

Troy shook his head.

‘I’m sorry, my darling,’ continued Emily. ‘That wasn’t a suggestion.’

‘No. Absolutely not,’ stated Troy. ‘Why? So they can die like everybody else we involve in this crappy war? No, I’m not calling my wolves just to get them exterminated. You saw those monster vamps. How can we fight them? According to the Prof, there’s maybe a hundred of them. We are all going to die.’

Emily stood up. ‘Most likely, yes,’ she shouted. ‘More of us are going to die. And if the packs join us, many of them will die. But you know what, mister Omega? It’s what we do. It is why we are all here. We put ourselves in harm’s way to protect those that cannot protect themselves. To live is to suffer. To suffer is to live. Pack. Now call them.’

Troy stared at her for a while, preparing himself for her mental onslaught. Waiting for the Daywalker to use her power to force him to do it.

But she didn't. Instead, she leaned forward and took his hand. 'Call them, Troy. It's what we do.'

He nodded, reluctantly. 'Pack.'

'Pack,' she agreed.

The wolfman sat back in his chair and closed his eyes for a few seconds. Everyone in the room felt an obvious pulse of power wash over them, momentarily robbing the room of air, raising the temperature by a few degrees and filling the place with static electricity.

Troy let out a deep sigh.

'It is done,' he said. 'They come.'

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CHAPTER 8

Armand spun the handle causing the little red plastic soccer player to kick the ball towards the goal.

His opponent jerked his goalie to the side, blocking the attempt and flicking it back.

'*Merde*,' cursed Armand. 'Damn stupid foosball.'

'You're just mad because it's the one thing you can't win at,' quipped Pierre.

'Pah!' exclaimed the tall, dark Frenchman as he lit another Gauloise from the stub of his last one. I'm your Alpha, you should have enough respect to lose on purpose.'

Pierre laughed. 'I think not, *mon amie*. Another game?'

'Might as well, but this time I get to kick off.'

The thunder of a group of Harleys shook the windows as another dozen bikes pulled up, stopped and parked next to Armand and Pierre's Fatboy's.

'Good,' said Pierre. 'Now maybe I'll get some decent competition from one of the girls.'

'Maybe,' shrugged Armand as he gestured to the barman.

The barman sauntered over and nodded.

'Food,' said Armand. 'What cheese you got?'

'We have some *Langres*, just in from Champagne. Some nice *Trou de Cru*, from Burgundy. And a big wheel of *Pont l'evecue*, arrived last week from Normandy. I recommend that with some cider, or maybe some Calvados apple brandy.'

Armand considered the choices. Cheese selection was not a thing to rush.

'What bread?'

'Baguettes. Made this morning. Also, some lovely Brioche, it will go well with the *Pont l'evecue*.'

'Just get them all,' urged Pierre. 'And lots of bread. Enough for a pack… I mean a *crowd* of hungry people.'

'Also, a couple of bottles of Calvados, and a dozen bottles of the house red.'

The barmen nodded and ambled back, exiting through a door behind the bar.

The rest of the bikers entered the bar, greeting their Alpha and Pierre loudly, laughing and blowing kisses.

There were eight men and four women. All dressed similarly. Jeans,

hand crafted biker boots, white t-shirts and leather jackets.

No tattoos.

No piercings.

All of them smoked.

Some sat down, pulling a few of the tables together, others stood around the foosball table, joshing their Alpha whenever he struck the ball incorrectly.

The food arrived to applause. Bottles were opened. Drinks were poured. The air filled with the pungent aroma of French Turkish tobacco, despite the numerous *Interdiction de Fumer* or, No Smoking signs behind the bar.

Armand was getting beaten once again when two buses pulled up outside the bar. The sound of singing and chanting echoed across the carpark as the doors swished open, disgorging over a hundred drunken English soccer fans.

The barman rolled his eyes and rushed to the entrance waving his hands at them.

'Non. Il n'y a pas de place pour vous,' he shouted. 'The place is too small. There is no space for you. Please move on.'

The chanting increased in volume and one of the fans shouted back. 'Just a few quick drinks, froggy, then we'll be on our way.'

'Drink, drink, drink, drink,' chanted the rest.

They surged towards the door.

But the barman held up both his hands, refusing to step aside. '*Non*. Please to leave. There is no drink for you. Find some place in the city.'

An empty bottle whirred out of the crowd and struck him on the forehead, knocking him backwards through the door.

A few of the hooligans cheered loudly.

Then Armand walked out.

Such was his presence, his sheer palpable aura of strength and authority, the jeering and chanting stopped almost immediately.

He stood and stared at the crowd.

Then he spoke.

'Fun is over,' he said. His quiet voice carrying clearly to all. 'I know you are all just having a bit of a party, and Joshua is not badly injured, so I will let this one go.' He smiled. 'Everybody gets one. Now leave. Immediately.'

He was about to turn and go back inside when one of the main instigators cussed and yelled at him. 'Why don't you make us.'

The jeering picked up again, the crowd feeding on each other's perceived courage.

Pierre appeared at the door and peered over Armand's shoulder. 'Hey, boss, stop playing with the children and come back inside. Let's finish the game.'

‘Yeah,’ shouted the lead hooligan. ‘Listen to your girlfriend. Go back inside, douchebag.’

Armand shook his head. ‘Now that was simply impolite,’ he said, wearily.

Pierre shrugged. ‘There’s always one asshole,’ he said. ‘Or in this case, about a hundred. Do you want me to teach them some manners?’

Armand shook his head. ‘I’ll do it.’

‘Need a hand?’

Armand chuckled. ‘There’s only a hundred of them.’

‘Okay,’ nodded Pierre as he turned to go back into the bar. ‘Try not to cripple anyone. I’ll be inside, that cheese is really good.’

‘Keep some for me,’ said Armand as he rolled his head on his shoulders a few times, loosening up stiff neck muscles.

Then he took a few swift steps forward and slapped the chief instigator upside his head.

To be honest, swift did not correctly describe the movement. Perhaps, he moved instantly across the intervening space, is a better description. Such was his speed that the one moment he was standing fifteen feet away, the next he was in amongst the crowd.

The man he slapped cartwheeled sideways, his feet leaving the ground as he somersaulted into the side of the bus.

Then Armand got busy.

In an effort to deal out the minimum of damage and prevent any fatalities, he stuck to using his open hand to strike.

But even then, he had to practice extreme caution lest he inadvertently break someone’s neck, or irreparably shattered their jaw. He was looking to teach them a lesson in behavior, not have them eating through a straw for the rest of their lives.

To be fair, the hooligans made every attempt to fight back. But it was an exercise in futility. When they punched or kicked or threw bottles, Armand was no longer there.

And if by mere chance a stray blow did get through, it was like hitting a brick wall.

The Alpha was busy smacking some sense into one of the bus drivers who had decided to join in, when the wave of power washed over him, raising his hackles, momentarily blinding him and reverberating in his brain like a crash of cymbals.

The call of the Omega.

Noting his momentary distraction, the crowd surged forward. But as they did, the Alpha threw his head back and howled.

The sound went straight to the crowd’s amygdalae, registering on a primal, atavistic level and braying out a warning.

That warning was – you have just lost your place at the top of the food chain.

Run.

As fast as you can.

And when Armand's howl was answered by the rest of the pack as they ran out of the bar, the two busloads of hooligans turned and ran. Pushing and shoving in their haste to reboard the buses and get the hell out of Dodge.

As it happened, they need not have worried, because their paltry bout of highjinks was the last thing on the pack's mind as they mounted their Harleys and kicked them to life.

The Omega had called.

They were coming.

'Vivre, c'est souffrir. Souffrir, c'est vivre,' roared Armand.

To live is to suffer. To suffer is to live.

Pack.

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CHAPTER 9

The two massive wolves circled each other. Both were bleeding from numerous wounds. But even as they moved, the deep cuts and slashes were already healing up.

They were surrounded by a circle of onlookers. Some in wolf form, others human. The spectators had been watching now for almost half an hour, and neither wolf had yet gained ascendency.

They made no sound as they fought, saving their energy for biting and rending, as opposed to any form of vocalization.

Without warning both attacked again, jaws gaping, canines flashing in the moonlight.

Tooth on tooth.

Claw on claw.

In the beginning of the contest, they had clashed and withdrawn, testing, looking for weakness. Now that stage had passed.

This clash was to the end.

Their movements were so fast as to be a mere blur. The balance of the battle was obvious to the surrounding pack, but it would have been incomprehensible to any non-supernatural being.

They could see both combatants were almost evenly matched.

Almost, but not quite.

The larger wolf made the first mistake. And you only ever got one.

Lunging forward he slightly overextended, and in a flash, the other wolf had him by the throat, *uber*-powerful jaws clamping shut like a steel bear-trap.

The larger wolf struggled, trying his best to pull free, but slowly, as the air to his lungs and the blood to his brain was choked off, he began to weaken.

Finally, his eyes rolled back in his head, he fell to the forest floor and morphed back to his human form.

Badly wounded, but not dead.

The victor stepped back and assumed their human form.

A six-foot tall, blue-eyed woman. Her muscles stood out like plaited ropes. Her blonde hair hung to the small of her back, and blood covered much of her body.

She leaned forward and held out her hand to the vanquished competitor. With a nod of thanks, he took it, stood up, and bowed deeply.

The pack began to howl their approval.

They had a new Alpha.

Ursula Meyer.

But before Ursula could acknowledge their approbation, a wave of power rippled over them all, rustling the trees and swirling the dead leaves about.

'Er hat angerufen,' growled Ursula. 'He has called.'

The pack ran to their parked BMW motorbikes and mounted up.

'Leben heißt leiden. Leiden heißt leben,' they roared as one.

To live is to suffer. To suffer is to live.

Pack.

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CHAPTER 10

Lorenzo Luciani turned off his Piaggio X9 custom scooter, kicked out the stand and dismounted, adjusting one of the six rear view mirrors as he did so.

Next to him stood another ten Piaggios. Most of them the same as his X9, except for two that were the three wheeled MP3's.

Like his ride, all were tricked out with at least a half dozen extra mirrors, custom seats with extra storage space for weapons, upgraded suspension, long range tanks and supercharged engines enabling them to travel at speeds well in excess of a hundred and twenty miles an hour.

He took out a pack of MS Italian cigarettes and a Zippo, lit and drew a hard lungful. Then he walked down the pathway, towards the group of tables outside a restaurant overlooking the slow-moving Tiber River.

Before he got there, he spotted a couple of young ladies walking towards him, He stopped, flashed a perfect smile that projected an aura of smoldering sexuality in the gigawatt range.

Then he blew them a kiss. 'Ciao Bella.'

They responded by returning his greeting with a giggle.

'Oh, Americans,' he said. 'Welcome, Uncle Samantha's. You want to come and sit with my friends and me, drink some wine, eat some pasta? Afterwards, maybe we make love until the sun comes up.'

Noting the slightly shocked reaction of the girls, he held his hands up and shrugged. 'Please, I am not, how do you say? Hitting on you? It is merely a serving suggestion.'

The girls looked at each other, smiled and nodded.

He took one on each arm and led them to the tables, stopping next to the largest one.

There were ten people sitting there. Six men, four women.

All were dressed in black raw-silk pants and shirts with long black leather jackets. Matrix style. Scarfs, designer sunglasses. Most smoking. The naked sexuality of the group was tangible. Every member as perfect and poised as a Vogue model.

The sheer volume of palpable sensuality left the two girls slightly breathless.

The men and women all stood and either hugged or kissed Lorenzo, some rather more passionately than others. Then Lorenzo introduced the two newcomers, allowed them to call out their own names as he

had not yet asked them.

'Debby,' said the one.

'Tasha.'

The two girls were greeted in almost as demonstrative a fashion as Lorenzo had been. And they reacted by blushing and smiling so widely it looked like they were about to swallow their own ears.

They all sat down and Lorenzo ordered a few bottles of Asti Spumanti and a half dozen platters of Antipasto.

The group chatted and laughed. Every now and then one of them would stand up and burst into song. Always opera, and always Italian.

Everyone who sang did so at a seemingly professional level, and after every rendition the surrounding patrons clapped and cheered lustily.

Because in Italy, opera is almost as important as soccer.

Almost.

After an hour or two, Debby asked if she could call a few friends. Lorenzo and a few of the others nodded and voiced their consent.

'Of course, *adorabile signora,'* said Lorenzo. 'The more of us, the merrier the event.'

Mere minutes later, another four girls arrived. They were greeted much like Debby and Tasha had been, and soon they too were shouting and laughing along with the others.

As the day drifted into evening, and the sun went down with a spectacular exhibition of lurid pinks and reds and yellows, some of the American girls began to sidle closer to some of the Italians. Both the men and some of the women.

Debby put her hand on Lorenzo's thigh and leaned close, puckering up her lips for a kiss.

But before anything happened, the entire group froze.

Then, as one, they stood up abruptly and headed for their scooters.

And instead of the aura of affable bonhomie and friendly exuberance, the air crackled with a feeling of barely restrained violence.

It was as if someone had flipped a switch and turned everyone at the table into their diametric opposites.

Except of course the American girls, who sat dumbstruck at the unexpected change of atmosphere.

'Hey, wait,' said Debby. 'Where are you going?'

'He has called,' answered Lorenzo, his eyes glowing yellow in the night.

'You lousy SOB's,' snapped Debby. 'We were having fun.'

Lorenzo threw a huge wad of Euros on the table. Then he leaned forward and smiled. '*Vivere è soffrire. Soffrire è vivere*,' he said. 'To live is to suffer. To suffer is to live.'

He blew her a kiss and smiled.
Then he mounted up. '*Branco di lupi.*'
'Pack,' shouted the rest.
The Piaggios growled to life.
'We ride.'

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CHAPTER 11

‘How could you let them escape?’ screeched the Morrigan. ‘Over a hundred grinders, five of your so-called top Chernobyl vampires, scores more brethren and an entire village of Familiars. And for what? You managed to kill a few humans. Normal humans.’

‘They were not normal,’ argued Andrev Kolinov, the most senior of the Chernobyl vampires from the failed ambush. ‘They were French Foreign Legion. And they were men amongst men. They sacrificed themselves in order to let the others escape.’

The Morrigan scoffed. ‘Oh, how touching. How honorable. You are pathetic. And a loser. You were meant to bring me their heads. Instead, all you did was massacre a couple of regular humans.’ The goddess turned to Belikov. ‘And what do you have to say about this, *Krov Tsar*?’ The scorn seemed to literally drip from her as she stared at the Blood King. ‘What will you do about this abject failure of an attempt to carry out your orders?’

Belikov, twitched slightly. Then he stood up, then sat down and scratched his cheek so violently that he drew blood. The wound healed up almost immediately and he stared at his bloody finger with a puzzled look on his face, wondering who had dared to damage the Blood King.

The Morrigan rolled her eyes. ‘King?’ she questioned again.

Belikov gestured to Jebe without even looking at him. ‘Kill him.’

Jebe frowned, but his king’s command was impossible to ignore, let alone disobey. Because, with the power of the *Triginta* flowing through him, every word he now uttered was an unquestionable directive. There was literally almost no way one could gainsay him. And there was no way anyone would want to. The desire to do his bidding was overwhelming.

Andrev Kolinov bared his fangs and prepared to fight. But Belikov merely scowled at him. ‘No,’ he commanded. ‘You will make no attempt to prevent this. You failed. On your knees.’

Kolinov blinked, shook his head like a wet dog and complied, unable to refuse the charismatic power of the *Triginta* bearer. Instead of anger, or fear, he now felt only shame that he had let his beloved King and master down. And as he sank slowly to his knees and the *Triginta* bathed him in its power, he wept openly such was his self-loathing due to his inability to serve his king correctly.

Jebe stood over him and with a single slash of his razor-sharp

talons, took off his head.

Belikov rose from his throne and lurched towards the doorway. ‘Happy now, crow woman?’ he questioned the goddess as he left the room.

The Morrigan smirked but said nothing, until the Blood King was absent. Then she turned to Jebe.

The King’s righthand man was staring at Kolinov’s lifeless body, an expression of loss on his face.

‘He was a friend,’ said Jebe. ‘I have known him for almost a thousand years. That is a long time.’

‘Yet you killed him without hesitation,’ observed the Morrigan.

Jebe looked at her and nodded, slowly as if in thought. ‘Yes,’ he admitted. ‘I did. And when I did, all I felt was joy at carrying out the King’s command. I want nothing more than to serve him. To the death.’

‘Have you always felt that way?’

Jebe pondered the question. ‘I think so. I cannot remember.’ He grasped his head in his hands and winced. ‘My head hurts.’

‘He is insane, you do know that?’

‘He is my king. And my friend,’ responded Jebe.

‘Your king, yes. Your friend. Not anymore. The *Triginta* gives great power, but its cost is huge. Anyway, it is not my concern. All I want is my revenge, are you still in?’

‘Of course. The *Krov Tsar* has commanded it.’

‘Good. I shall think on our next move.’

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CHAPTER 12

The sounds of the huge BMW bikes reverberated through the valley as they thundered up the dirt road towards Merlin's Croatian retreat.

Wending their way through the thick forest, they proceeded up the long sweeping driveway and pulled up in front of the villa, lining up with Germanic precision.

Alpha Ursula dismounted first and stood in front of her bike, arms crossed, waiting.

The rest of the pack arrayed themselves on each side of her, in a slight V formation.

Troy stepped out of the door and approached them.

As one, the Germans took a knee.

'Pack,' they roared.

Troy walked up to Ursula. 'Rise, Alpha.'

She stood. Troy looked her up and down, appraising her with frank gaze.

She stared back at him, raising her chin slightly. Showing that she would not be cowed.

She was incorrect.

Troy morphed into his wolfman mode, sundering his clothes as he did so. Then he growled.

Ursula took a step back, then she dropped her gaze and once again took a knee.

'Better,' grunted the Omega. 'Confidence is good,' he continued. 'Daring is admirable. Courage is to be applauded.' He leaned towards her, pulling back his lips to expose his massive canines. 'However, Alpha, be careful you do not cross the line between self-assurance and disrespect.'

He stepped back and stared at them all, one at a time. 'I. Am. Omega,' he roared.

'Pack,' they answered once again in unison.

Emily watched from the door. She knew that in any other society, the way Troy was asserting his dominance would have been considered unnecessary. Even uncalled for.

But she was also Pack, so she knew the way of the wolf was a harsh way. Weakness was not tolerated. She approved of Ursula's attempt to show her strength, but what she had done verged on a challenge.

That would not be tolerated.

In fact, she was lucky. Troy had treated her lightly. If he had

attacked her, beaten her, even killed her, the Pack would have accepted the outcome as the will of the Omega.

Instead, he had cowed her with the pure strength of his indomitable will.

Emily smiled to herself. Ursula was obviously a strong woman, but she would need to learn a little more humility if she wanted to continue as an Alpha.

'Let us run,' commanded Troy.

The Pack morphed into their wolven forms, as did the Omega.

With a chorus of howls, they ran into the forest.

Emily did not join them. Although she was Pack, this was between the new wolves and their leader. She would run with them at a later stage.

Instead, she went back inside, looking for Tag in the hope he would make her a mug of tea.

***

Tag sat at the kitchen table with Emily and Muller. He was eating a sandwich constructed from a two-foot-long baguette stuffed with a couple of pounds of beef bourguignon. Bits of stewed beef, carrots and mushroom dripped onto the tabletop from the sides of the overloaded maxi-sub every time he took a bite.

'Mmm,' he grunted. 'Juicy.'

Emily shook her head and hid a smile.

There was a slight commotion outside and Emily cocked her head to listen. 'The Pack have returned.'

Moments later, Troy entered the kitchen in human form, followed by Ursula and her Beta, Hans.

The Omega introduced them both.

Muller stood and shook their hands. Emily smiled a greeting and Tag nodded over his massive Gallic Hoagie.

'Frrmmph,' he mumbled, his mouth full of bread and bourguignon.

Ursula sneered at the big man and totally ignored Emily as she sat down.

Tag swallowed. 'Tea?' he offered the two new pack members. 'It's my own special blend. Darn good it is.'

'You eat like a *Schwein*,' snapped Ursula. 'And I don't drink English tea.'

Tag chuckled. 'Oink. And it's Jamaican tea.' He looked at Hans. 'You want?'

Hans glanced at his Alpha, and she shook her head.

'No, thank you,' he responded.

Tag shrugged. 'Your loss.'

He got up and began to prepare six mugs. When they had steeped

correctly, he added his usual milk and industrial contents of sugar and carried the tray to the table.

He placed a mug in front of everyone.

'I said no,' stated Ursula.

'Lighten up,' replied Tag. 'Just in case. Give it a try, you won't regret it.'

'No,' shouted the German Alpha as she swept the mug from the table, sending it crashing to the floor.

Tag laughed out loud. 'You are an irritable lady, you know. And maybe a bit thick as well, because now you gotta clean up the mess.'

'Yes? Who's going to make me?'

Tag chuckled again. 'No one. You just gonna do it because it's the right thing to do.'

'Come on, Ursula,' interjected Emily. 'We're all friends here. Just clean it up and we'll forget about the whole tantrum thing.'

Ursula glared at Emily. 'You are not my Omega,' she stated. 'Subsequently, I advise you to keep quiet.'

Tag stood up. 'Hey, Alpha,' he said softly. 'Now you just got rude. Apologize to the girly.'

'Make me,' replied the German as she also stood.

Emily glanced at Troy, but he just shrugged slightly and grinned. This was necessary.

'Tag,' interjected Emily. 'I don't need you to fight my battles.'

Tag frowned. 'I know that, girly,' he replied. 'I'm just worried that this new wolf may have overstepped her boundaries out of ignorance. And if I don't explain nicely to her, then you might. And it would be a shame if you killed her.'

Emily nodded, and managed to stop laughing.

'What, that little slip of a girl, kill me?' scoffed Ursula. 'In her dreams. I am the first Germanic female Alpha in eight hundred years. No one but my Omega can stand against me. And especially not you. You are not even Pack.'

Tag stood back from the table. 'Okay, missus Alpha,' he said. 'Let's take this outside, shall we?'

Ursula nodded and followed the big man out.

At the same time, Merlin and the Prof came walking in. Sensing the tension, Merlin asked. 'What's going on?'

'Tag is going to teach the new Alpha some manners,' answered Muller.

Merlin grinned. 'Well, this should be fun.'

He and the Prof followed the pair out.

They were joined by Muller, Troy and Emily.

As they walked out, Troy pulsed a message to the Pack and they came running to form a ring around Tag and Ursula.

‘Tag has challenged Ursula,’ announced Troy. ‘Obviously, as he is not Pack, this is not for the position of Alpha. He has made the challenge for personal reasons.’

‘Yeah, I personally think that Ursula is acting like an ass,’ stated Tag.

‘The usual rules apply,’ continued Troy. ‘This is not a death match. They will fight until one has been subdued. Begin.’

Tag stared at the Alpha, waiting. ‘Hey,’ he said. ‘You gonna go wolf or not?’

Ursula smirked. ‘I don’t really think I have to. You’re big and strong, but I’ll bet you’re also slow. No, I think this form is fine.’

Tag frowned. ‘Doesn’t seem fair. Tell you what, if you aren’t gonna go wolf, I’ll give you the first shot. That should help. I’ll just stand here; you take the first swing. Okay?’

Ursula snarled. ‘Are you trying to insult me?’

Tag looked puzzled. ‘No. Just being fair. Hell, there’s no being nice to some people. Come on, hit me.’

With a howl of anger, Ursula launched herself at Tag. Lengthening her claws as she did so, slamming them into his chest and ripping sideways to tear a bone-deep gash.

Then she smugly stood back and waited for the big man to fall.

Tag looked down and shook his head. ‘I’m an idiot,’ he said. ‘I should have known. Another darn shirt gone. Why do people always rip my shirts? I must be cursed.’

He stripped the ruined shirt off, scrubbed the blood off his chest and cast it aside.

Ursula stared open mouthed at the big man’s entirely unblemished chest.

‘But… how? Who are you? What…?’

‘Why do you think they call me the Immortal?’ asked Tag. ‘I’ll give you a clue, it’s got something to do with not dying. Like ever. My shirts – well, that’s a different story.’

Ursula was visibly shaken. ‘I thought you were a myth.’

Tag guffawed. ‘That’s me. Mythical dude.’ Then his expression got serious. ‘Right,’ he said. ‘My turn.’

Ursula began to prepare herself, but Tag moved so fast he was a mere blur of color.

The punch he threw caught the Alpha in the side of her head and cartwheeled her over the ring of werewolves and into the trunk of a nearby sturdy oak. The blow would have killed a normal human. But Tag knew werewolves were both super-tough and incredibly resilient. Not to mention their ability to heal at a rate almost as fast as his.

Emily ran over to check on her. After a cursory examination, she looked up and nodded. ‘She’s out. But she’ll be fine.’

Tag nodded. ‘I win. She can apologize to you when she comes around. And she owes me a shirt.’

The big man walked back to the house. The Pack parted in front of him, lowering their gaze as he walked by. Not out of fear, but out of respect.

He may not Pack. But he was definitely an Alpha.

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CHAPTER 13

The French pack arrived earlier that day, just before lunch. Troy greeted them as he had the Germans, and then the two packs ran together.

Now they were sitting around a long outdoor trestle table, drinking wine and eating a vast selection of cheeses and breads they brought with them.

The Germans added beers and piles of frankfurters and sauerkraut.

Armand, the French Alpha, was arguing with Tag. 'No, *mon ami*,' he said forcefully. '*Boeuf a la bourguignonne* is not a stew. It is a casserole. Please, I am so happy you like it, but I beg you to refrain from calling it French stew.'

Tag frowned. 'Stew, casserole, what's the difference?'

A few of the French wolves sucked in a sharp breath at Tag's culinary ignorance.

Armand shrugged in that typically Gallic way, his shoulders rising, his chin dropping and his face assuming a lugubrious mien. 'A casserole is cooked in the oven. In a cast iron casserole dish. Lovingly enveloped by a gentle heat from all sides at once, ensuring an unctuous, tender and moist dish.

'A stew is simply stuff loaded into a pot and plonked on the stove.'

'Whatever,' noted Tag. 'It's good, whatever you dudes call it. Not sure about these cheeses though. They smell of old socks.'

Armand laughed. 'Oh yes, the smellier the cheese, the better it tastes. Try some.'

Tag looked dubious, but he grabbed a knife, sliced a piece off, and popped it into his mouth. A few seconds later he grinned.

'Man, that is good.'

Armand grabbed the big man's face and planted a kiss on each cheek. '*C'est bon à entendre*, big man.'

Tag blushed. 'Hey what's with all the kissing. Steady, dude. I mean, whatever, just, I dunno.' He grabbed another slice of stinky cheese and grinned embarrassedly.

Leaning back in his chair, he didn't notice Ursula sitting down next to him until she touched his arm and spoke.

'I am sorry,' she said, softly. Her voice barely even a whisper.

Tag shrugged. 'It is what it is,' he said. 'I get it. New Alpha. And a girl. You gotta make sure everyone knows who's the boss.'

Ursula nodded.

‘But you don’t have to be a complete ass to show people that,’ continued Tag. ‘We is family here. Same enemy, same friends. We at war with the *Nosferatu*, not each other.’

‘I know,’ said Ursula. ‘And I said I’m sorry.’

‘Also, I didn’t challenge you just because you chucked my tea on the floor and then was rude to Emily. I challenged you before Emily did. Because I’m a gentle soul. That’s why they call me Tag the Gentle.’

‘I thought it was Tag the Immortal,’ joshed Ursula.

‘It is what I say it is,’ chuckled Tag. ‘But seriously. I got a good grip on my anger. Emily, well let’s just say, she wouldn’t have been so tender.’

The German Alpha looked puzzled. ‘I’m not being rude, so don’t get all huffy, but Emily? Really? I could take her.’

Tag shook his head. ‘Trust me.’

‘Sure,’ scoffed Ursula.

The big man shrugged. ‘Some things you just gotta learn by yourself. It’s simple really, just don’t be an ass,’ he said as he took a bite of a massive frankfurter. ‘Mmm. Porky.’

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CHAPTER 14

The Italian Pack arrived late the next day and scootered past the training ground that Emily, Troy, Tag and Muller had set up.

At the moment, the team weren't doing any specific training with the Pack, they were merely concentrating on teamwork, speed, strength and fitness. The wolves were naturally super-athletic, but the packs had never fought the *Nosferatu* on the level Emily and her friends had.

Ursula turned to watch the scooters flash by. The Italians were all dressed in their usual black silk and long black leather coats. None of them wore helmets.

'Ridiculous scooters,' snapped the German Alpha. 'They look like a bunch of idiots.'

'Hey,' interjected Tag. 'I think you're breaking the don't be an ass rule.'

Ursula shrugged and sniffed her disapproval. 'So what? Look at them. 'All show and no go. It's not right.'

Troy came out of the house to greet them, and minutes later the combined Pack was on the run, cruising the forest together.

***

'I thought wolves didn't carry weapons,' said Tag. 'But these are so cool.'

Lorenzo, the Italian Alpha, laughed. 'Yes, we work on the theory that you can never have too much firepower. Each of us carry the Spectre M4 submachinegun in .45acp, here in a shoulder holster. Plus, a Berretta Px4 Storm pistol chambered for the same in a holster in the small of the back.

'But here, is the most important part of our equipment,' continued Lorenzo, as he flipped open one of the panniers attached to the back of his scooter. 'A battery powered cool box.'

Tag peered in. The pannier was full to the brim with wine, beer and a selection of antipasto. The big man grinned. 'Seriously,' he said. 'I've been getting things wrong for so long. All you dudes have the most awesome food. Long bread, stew, massive sausages and now all these hams.'

Lorenzo chuckled. 'Wait until you taste Giovanni's pasta vongole. Spaghetti with clams. After that, death will seem acceptable, because

you will have already gone to heaven.'

Tag joined in the merriment, then he glanced over his shoulder and called Muller. 'Hey, holy dude,' he yelled. 'Come check out Lorenzo's armory. It's super-cool.'

Muller walked up and greeted the Italian Alpha.

And the effect was nothing less than staggering.

Lorenzo's eyes grew wide, his face paled and he immediately dropped to his knees.

'*Santissima*,' he greeted the Knight as he grabbed his hand and kissed his ecclesiastical ring.

The rest of the Italian pack saw the Alpha drop to his knees and ran over. As soon as they saw Muller, they too went down on both knees.

Cries of, *Santissima* and *Benedetto* rippled through the Pack. Most Holy and Blessed One.

'Dude,' said Tag in a shocked stage whisper. 'What's going on?'

'This is the most holy, Knight Muller *Il Pio*,' said Lorenzo. 'He is the only living being to have been awarded *the Supreme Order of Christ* and *the Order of Saint Sylvester and the Golden Militia*. He is the left hand of the Pope.'

Muller smiled. 'No longer, my son. The new Pope has disowned me and belittled my order. Long may he live in God's name'.

'You have been excommunicated?' exclaimed Lorenzo in a shocked voice.

'No,' denied Muller. 'Simply left to my own devices.'

'Well now, we serve you, most Holy,' interjected Lorenzo. 'With the Omega's permission of course, we swear our undying allegiance and servitude.'

'I am sure that is unnecessary,' replied Muller. 'We are all the same here. We fight a common enemy, there is no need to talk about servitude and such.'

Lorenzo shook his head vehemently, as did many of the other Italians. 'No, most Holy, we would not dare to put ourselves on your level. We are yours to command, in his name. Amen.'

The rest of the pack echoed their Alpha's words.

'In his name. Amen.'

Muller placed his hand on Lorenzo's head and spoke a blessing in Latin. *'Benedici questo soldato nel Nome del Padre, e del Figlio e dello Spirito Santo, Amen.'* Then he stood back and repeated it, opening his arms to encompass the entire Pack.

Lorenzo got to his feet, followed by the rest of the pack. 'Thank you, Father,' he said. 'We are your holy warriors to call on as you need.'

'Muller's Warriors,' exclaimed Tag. 'No, Muller's Marauders, yeah, that's it. Featuring Tag and missus Jones, of course. Ha, I like it.'

Lorenzo bowed and took his leave.

Tag stared at his friend for a while. Then he spoke. ‘You know, pious, sometimes I forget you’re a priest as well. What with all the killing and stuff.’

Muller raised an eyebrow. ‘It is okay, I forgive you, my son.’

Tag did a double take.

Then Muller winked at him.

Tag’s laughter boomed out. ‘But, seriously,’ he added. ‘These Italian wolves look on you like some sort of saint. It’s vaguely creepy. So don’t expect me to get all worshipful on your virtuous ass, okay?’

Muller grinned. ‘I wouldn’t dream of it.’

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CHAPTER 15

Troy could tell the Pack were more than a little dubious regarding his description of the prowess of the Chernobyl Monsters. Not that any of them would dare gainsay him. But the doubt was there. Because, to be fair, the monster vampires were an anomaly. A freak of supernatural nature.

But as Troy and the team of hunters knew, they were real. And they were currently mankind's deadliest threat.

Lorenzo cleared his throat, a sign he wanted to speak.

Troy nodded his permission.

'But, Omega,' said the Alpha. 'However bad these uber-vamps are…'

'BUMF's,' interjected Tag. 'We call them, BUMFs. Big Ugly Moth…'

'Whatever,' continued Lorenzo. 'Surely, they cannot stand against the combined packs. Especially when we have a Knight of the Holy See with us.'

'And Merlin, and the Immortal, the Professor. And the Daywalker,' Armand Moreau, the French Alpha added.

Ursula scoffed. 'The Daywalker is a myth.'

Emily turned and looked at the German Alpha for a few seconds. Then she walked up to her. 'Ursula,' she said quietly. 'I think the time has come to inform you, that not only are you rude and obnoxious, you are also remarkably ill-informed. That ignorance, combined with your overweening arrogance is making you extremely dislikable.'

Ursula smirked. 'Tough,' she said. 'I am Alpha. Who the hell are you to approach me with such disdain, little girl?'

There was a collective drawing in of air from the team of hunters, and Tag took a step forward.

But Troy grabbed his arm. 'Emily is Pack,' he said.

'But she'll kill her,' replied Tag.

Ursula snorted. 'No, I won't,' she said. 'As long as she apologizes for disrespecting me.'

'No, you moron,' snapped Tag. 'Not you. I mean, Emily. She might kill you.'

Ursula was about to answer when Emily slapped her so hard, she lost her footing and rolled across the grass. Springing back up, she charged. Changing as she did so, morphing seamlessly from six-foot-tall female to massive silver wolf.

Emily unleashed the Daywalker. Not completely, just enough to power her up a few more notches.

Ursula was no slouch when it came to hand-to-hand, or tooth, combat. In fact, in her climb to the top of the pack she had not lost one fight. She had never even come close to doing so. And as such, she fought with a confidence born from countless victories.

But it was also a confidence built on sand. Its basic premise anchored to a dock that shifted with the tide.

She assumed she was almost without peer. Faster, stronger and more brutal than any she had come up against before.

She had assumed incorrectly.

At first, in the maelstrom of combat, she thought she was getting the upper hand. While she had not yet landed any solid blows, nor got her teeth into Emily, neither had the young girl dealt her any damage.

Actually, thought Ursula to herself as she lunged forward for another attack, it almost seemed as through Emily was doing her best not to get too close to her. She wasn't even counterattacking, simply dodging out of the way as much as she could.

Ursula smiled to herself as she realized, the girl was afraid of her. Laughing internally, she upped her attacks, baring her teeth and throwing herself recklessly forward, set on ending the mismatched farce as quickly as possible. Determined to prove her absolute dominance.

After another two minutes of fruitless combat, it began to dawn on Ursula that she hadn't actually landed any sort of blow at all. And her slashing bites did little more than clamp down on fresh air.

The first tiny inkling of doubt flitted through her mind.

Then Emily hit her.

It was done with such casual ease, such economy of movement, and with such unbelievable speed, that Ursula instantly knew – Emily had simply been playing with her.

Then the Alpha's nightmare began. For the next twenty minutes, Emily tore her apart. Ursula lost her left ear; her jaw was shattered. Her front right leg broken. Ribs fractured. Her fur sodden with bright red blood and her one eye swollen shut.

As fast as she healed, Emily would break her again.

And again.

And again.

Troy frowned, but he did not intervene.

To live is to suffer. To suffer is to live.

Ursula was experiencing the Pack motto first hand.

Then everything changed. In a tsunami of undying darkness, the Daywalker gained full ascendency. Emily's eyes turned to deepest black, her fangs extended and her talons grew to the size of daggers.

At the same time, she lashed out with her mind. The terrible power of the darkness smashing into all about her, bringing most of the Pack

to their knees as their minds were assailed by the Daywalker's rampant power.

Ursula looked up at the seemingly invincible being that stood over, and for the first time in her life she knew fear. No, not fear, horror. For what stared back at her was not human. Nor was it animal. It was both the embodiment of evil, the personification of malevolence, while at the same time being a dark angel of righteous vengeance.

A dichromatic combination of our direst fears and our greatest hopes.

The being picked Ursula up by the scruff of her neck and then, using the talons of her left hand, she prepared to eviscerate her.

'Stop,' ordered Merlin, his voice a thunderous command that could not be ignored. Even by the might of the Daywalker.

Emily snarled and turned to face him. 'It is my right, wizard,' she spat. 'As victor, so can I decide on the fate of the vanquished.'

'Yes,' agreed Merlin. 'But as Emily. Not as … that.'

The Daywalker stood, not moving. Not even breathing while she stared at the wizard.

'You would look to challenge me, Daywalker?' questioned Merlin.

'Hey, girly,' said Tag. 'It's over.'

And slowly, the light returned to Emily's eyes.

She dropped Ursula's limp body and strode from the scene, slamming the front door as she entered the villa.

Tag and Troy rushed over to check on Ursula, who had morphed back into her human form. She was alive, and awake. Barely.

Merlin walked over, placed a hand on her chest and mumbled an incantation. A pale blue light enveloped her and the blood stopped flowing from her countless wounds.

'I thought she was a myth,' whispered Ursula.

'Yeah,' replied Tag. 'You say that a lot.'

'Sorry.'

'Yeah,' repeated Tag. 'Now that you don't say enough.'

Ursula tried to smile, and then she went limp.

Tag looked up at Merlin. 'Will she live?'

Merlin scowled. 'Perhaps. She's tough. But when Emily gets like that… the wounds are more than physical, as you know. She drains one's life force as well as one's blood.' He turned to Troy. 'How could you let this happen?'

'Ursula challenged her. Pack rules.'

Merlin snorted. 'Bloody children. You do realize that makes Emily their new Alpha?'

'It is what it is,' responded Troy.

'Pah!' exclaimed the wizard. 'Now you sound like Tag. Bloody fools, the lot of you.' He took a last look at Ursula and then stormed off.

‘Hey,’ said Tag. ‘What did I do?’

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CHAPTER 16

The Prof collected Ursula and took her to her room to recover. Although she was badly injured, her natural healing abilities, combined with Merlin's curative spell ensured she was safely out of the woods. The Prof mixed up a restorative potion and, with the help of one of the other German pack members, one Heidi Weber, he managed to dribble most of it down the ex-Alpha's throat.

Within minutes her breathing become more regular and some color started returning to her face.

'The potion will replace the blood she lost,' explained the Prof. 'She will live. It will be interesting to see how she manages on a psychological level,' he continued. 'The Daywalker is no normal adversary. And with a woman as proud as Ursula, I fear she may be unable to handle her fall from grace.'

Heidi nodded her agreement. 'She has always been driven by her need to succeed. To prove herself. Ever since she was a cub, she fought to be the best of the best. And she was. But I fear she did lose a part of herself in her desire to become Alpha. She lost her humanity. Of all of us, Ursula was the closest to being almost all wolf.' She looked up at the Prof. 'Will Emily banish her?'

The Prof frowned. 'Emily is a kind and fair young lady,' he said. 'I am not sure what she will do, but I can assure you, whatever it is, it will not be cruel nor unnecessary.'

'And the Daywalker?' asked Heidi.

The Prof shook his head and sighed. 'That is another question,' he admitted. 'The Daywalker is part of Emily, but it is also a separate entity. Although she constantly strives to keep it from gaining permanent ascendency. As a wolf, what do you think Troy will tell her to do?'

'He is Omega. This is beneath him. To live is to…'

'Yes, yes,' snapped the Prof. 'Suffer and so forth. Bloody stupid motto, if you ask me.'

'All I am saying is,' continued Heidi. 'He will not intervene. Emily won the challenge. As such, Ursula's life is hers. Banish her, kill her, ignore her. Whatever she decides, it is the lore and it will shall be adhered to.'

The Prof nodded. 'Well, I'm all done here. She needs rest now more than anything else. I would appreciate it if you stayed to keep an eye on her.'

Heidi nodded her acceptance of the Prof's request.

'Thank you. Now, I'm off to have a chat to Emily. I have a feeling she will need someone to talk to.'

The Prof left the room, closing the door quietly behind him as he did so.

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Emily stared out of the window, eyes blank, face expressionless.

The Prof busied himself fixing a pipeful of tobacco. Using a small conjuration, he lit, puffed the baccy to life and blew a series of magnificent smoke rings. The aroma of rum and maple Navy Cut filled the room.

Emily gave a tiny smile. 'I like that smell,' she said quietly. 'My stepdad used to smoke a pipe. His study always smelled of dark cut. Cherry, I think.'

'Been smoking the same blend for…' the Prof thought. 'Since the 1700's. A hundred years or so after Walter brought some back from his travels.'

'Walter?'

'Sir Walter Raleigh.'

'You knew Walter Raleigh?' exclaimed Emily. 'Wow. What was he like?'

'Good looking. Fancied himself a bit of a scholar and a poet. Claimed he brought the potato to the western world, but the Spaniards had discovered it ages before. Truth be told, didn't like the fellow much. Now, Marco Polo, there was a proper gentleman. Humble, astute. Fine fellow.'

Emily stared at the Prof for a few seconds. 'How old are you actually?' she asked.

The Prof frowned as he thought. Eventually he chuckled. 'Not sure. Umm…very?'

Neither of them spoke for a minute or so. Then Emily asked. 'Is she going to be alright?'

The Prof shrugged. 'Physically, I'm sure. Mentally, that remains to be seen. You roughed her up pretty badly. Worse, you played with her. Humiliated her. And to a woman like Ursula, I suspect she would rather you had killed her.'

'They must think I'm a monster.'

'Who?'

'The Pack. Everyone.'

'Not you,' said the Prof.

'Who then?'

'The Daywalker. Perhaps.'

'I am the Daywalker. The Daywalker is me. We are one and the

same.'

'Yes,' admitted the Prof. 'And no. Look, Emily, we need the Daywalker. The team needs her, the world needs her. Sometimes one needs to unleash the beast. I know you hate it, but I also know it's necessary.

'And by the way, you do realize you are now the new German Alpha?'

'Oh, crap,' exclaimed Emily. 'No, I didn't think. But I don't want to be Alpha. Hell, sometimes I don't even want to be Emily. This sucks.'

'Tough,' stated the Prof. 'Enough feeling sorry for yourself, get out there and do what you do.'

'I'm not feeling sorry for myself,' argued Emily.

The Prof chuckled. 'Yes, you are. And that's fine. But leaders are allowed a lot less slack than others. So, time's up. Head high, shoulders back, get out there and talk to the troops. Remember, with great power comes great responsibility.'

'Really?' said Emily with a laugh. 'Did you just Spiderman me? Who are you, uncle Ben?'

The Prof grinned sheepishly.

Emily kissed him on the forehead. 'Thanks, Prof,' she said. 'I'll get out there and do my thing.'

The Prof watched her leave the room, then he shook his head. 'Who the hell is Spiderman?' he asked himself.

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CHAPTER 17

Emily walked out of the villa to be greeted by the entire German pack, sans Ursula and Heidi.

As one they took a knee, eyes cast down. Submissive to their new Alpha.

Emily's first thought was to apologize. But she quickly ditched that as a bad idea. An apology would have humiliated Ursula even more. It would belittle what the Pack perceived as Emily's challenge for leadership.

Which it actually wasn't. Emily had honestly merely wanted to teach Ursula some manners. And perhaps a small lesson in humility.

She had no wish to usurp her position as Alpha.

'Your Alpha is recovering,' started Emily. 'When she rises, she will be stronger, more resilient and even better suited to leadership. While we wait for her to recuperate, we will train. All of us. Pack, hunters, Alphas and Omega.' She paused and allowed herself a slight grin. 'Even the Daywalker.'

The German pack rose as one. 'Pack!'

Emily punched her right fist in the air and answered. 'Pack.'

Hans, the German Beta, stepped forward. 'May I ask,' he said. 'Does this mean you are not assuming the position of Alpha, even though you have acquired the right through combat?'

Emily nodded.

'Why?' asked Hans.

Emily glanced over the Beta's shoulder and saw the rest of the pack listening, waiting for her answer.

'I would be honored to be your Alpha,' said Emily. 'However, firstly, I did not challenge Ursula for the position, my challenge was based on a personal matter. And, secondly, I honestly do not think I would be as good an Alpha as Ursula. I am pack, I am wolf, but I am also Daywalker. And Shadowhunter, and Gargoyle master. To be a truly good Alpha one cannot have such split responsibilities. To be a great Alpha one must think and be only one thing. Pack.'

Hans smiled. 'Thank you for your honest answer, Emily,' he said as he bowed. 'I am relieved. We thought that perhaps you did not deem us worthy to lead.'

Emily laughed. 'No, Hans,' she replied. 'It's quite the opposite. Now, let's train.'

***

The sun was beginning to go down and the Pack had been drilled hard for the last four hours.

'Work together,' shouted Emily. 'Like we showed you earlier. Each group of four wolves must attack simultaneously. Hamstrings and back of the neck. Never try to take these BUMF's from the front. Trust me, they are too strong, too fast and too seriously hard to kill. Their rate of recovery is almost on a level with Tag. They are almost as strong as Troy, and nearly as fast as me. Put that together in a single package and you are looking at a world of hurt if you make one wrong move.'

Lorenzo put his hand up, a questioning look on his face. Since Emily's fight against Ursula, the Pack had started treating her differently. They had always treated her with respect, but now that respect was tinged with anxiety. For they had seen the face of the Daywalker, and it was a fearsome thing to behold.

She had spoken to Troy about it. Unhappy that she should invoke such feelings. But Troy had simply shrugged and said, 'It's their problem, not yours. Don't sweat it, they'll get over it, or they won't.'

It wasn't much as far as advice went, but Emily accepted it and decided to simply act as if all was as before.

She smiled at the Italian Alpha. 'Just speak, Lorenzo,' she said. 'This isn't the classroom and I'm not the teacher.'

The Alpha shrugged. 'Well, it sort of is, and you sort of are. But I was going to ask, what about Holy Water?'

Emily looked at Muller. The Knight stepped forward. 'I am sure it will work on these monster vampires,' he said. 'But only if you have the faith to back it up. Do you?'

The pack members shuffled their feet and looked at the ground. 'I thought not,' added Muller. 'Look, there is no one thing that will defeat these monsters. We have to use all the weapons at our disposal. Guns, silver nitrate grenades, teamwork, superior planning and training. But make no mistake, we can and we will win this.'

'Right,' interjected Emily. 'I want you all to go wolf and we will continue. Tag and Troy will be your targets. Don't hold back, they can take it. And remember, don't attack front on, go for hamstrings and back of neck or head. Teams one and two, you start. Let's do it.'

'Last question,' asked Lorenzo. 'How will we tell the difference between these … umm … BUMF's and a normal *Nosferatu*?'

'It's easy.' Interjected Tag. 'Just imagine the ugliest dude you ever seen. Like ever. Then imagine him a thousand times uglier. Then add a truckload of warts and tumors and knobbles and crap. Then make him the size of the Hulk, you know, the big green dude. That's a BUMF.'

Lorenzo raised an eyebrow. ‘Okay, got it. Thanks.’

Emily nodded her agreement, then stood back and watched as the Pack morphed into wolf mode, split into their designated quartets and proceeded to take turns attacking both Tag and Troy.

Sensing someone approaching her, Emily turned to see Ursula walking up behind her. She had changed and showered and, although still looking a little haggard, seemed to have recovered well.

The German bowed low to her. ‘Alpha,’ she greeted, her voice rough with emotion.

Emily smiled. ‘Not me,’ she said. ‘That’s your title. I prefer Emily. Or Shadowhunter if you must.’

Ursula frowned. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Simple,’ replied Emily. ‘You Alpha. Me not.’

‘But you won. The position is yours.’

Emily shook her head. ‘Look, Ursula, it was never about that.’

‘I don’t get it,’ interjected the German Alpha. ‘Why wouldn’t you take the position if you could?’

‘I have enough problems already,’ explained Emily. ‘Why would I want to add being a pack Alpha to that? As I said, that challenge was to show you, as Tag would say, that you really need to stop being an ass all the time. Just because you’re Alpha doesn’t mean you have to be so super-aggressive twenty-four-seven. Lighten up.’

‘I’m too scared to,’ admitted Ursula. ‘If I lower my guard, one of the Pack might mistake that for weakness, then they would challenge me for leadership.’

‘Would any of them win?’ asked Emily.

Ursula shook her head. ‘Until you, no one has ever bested me. Not even close. Oh, except for Tag, obviously. Actually,’ continued the German Alpha. ‘From a list of zero, it’s quickly growing. *Scheisse*.’

Emily chuckled at Ursula’s revelation. ‘Well then, what’s the problem? They challenge, you kick their asses, your position as Alpha is strengthened. Anyway, you’d be surprised, very few people actually see kindness as weakness. Give it a go, I reckon you will be amazed at the outcome.’

Ursula stared unseeingly at the battling pack members, thinking on what Emily had just told her.

‘I will try,’ she said. Then she smiled. ‘But I must warn you, even my friends consider me to be a bit of an asshole, so I can’t promise anything.’

‘Good enough for me,’ said Emily. Then her attention was drawn to the training pack members. Raucous laugher had replaced the prior sounds of grunting and growling.

Now, instead of attacking each other, Lorenzo and a few of the other Italian wolves had begun playing a game of catch. Morphing

from wolf to human and back again as they leapfrogged over each other and generally rolled around acting like exuberant teenagers.

'Look at them,' scoffed Ursula. 'Those Italians spend more time playing, gamboling in the sun, swimming and eating and singing, than training.'

Lorenzo's supernatural hearing picked up the German Alpha's judgment and he walked over to her.

'What the problem, *herr* Alpha? People having too much fun for you?'

'It is unseemly for us to gambol about like puppies,' snapped Ursula. 'Werewolves don't frolic. We are deadly killing machines.'

Lorenzo shrugged. 'Yes, we are. But we are also deadly killing machines that like to have a bit of a romp. *Ama la vita.* One must love life.'

'To live is to suffer,' returned Ursula. 'To suffer is to live. I hear nothing about loving life.'

Lorenzo grabbed his heart. 'Ah, you wound me with your words, *mio caro*, my darling. We suffer, always we suffer. For to love is to suffer. The ache of a broken heart. The sadness of a lost love. *Il mal di cuore*.' He smiled sadly. A genuine expression, no longer teasing. 'Ursula, I am a three hundred and ninety-seven years old,' he continued. 'I have lost more friends and lovers than you can possibly imagine. Do not lecture me on what it is to suffer. Now, enough of such maudlin talk, let us prepare some chilled wine and a bowl of *pasta e fagioli*. All this fighting has made me hungry.'

Lorenzo walked away, heading for the villa.

Emily turned to face the affronted German Alpha. She shook her head. 'You know, Ursula, your friends are right.'

'About what?'

Emily laughed. 'You are actually a bit of an asshole.'

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CHAPTER 18

‘We have no need to train like rookie soldiers,’ argued Paval Molotov, one of the senior Chernobyl vampires. ‘We are the top of the food chain, unassailable. Unstoppable. Just tell us who we have to kill and it will be done.’

Jebe shook his head. ‘No, Pavel, that is not how it is going to work. Not from now on. We already tried that. I sent five of our Chernobyl brethren, scores of *Nosferatu* and over a hundred Grinders to eliminate this threat, and all they managed to do was kill a handful of mortal soldiers.

‘And now we have found out the Omega called the Pack together. We are not yet sure of their numbers, but I would hazard a guess at maybe thirty plus. Add that to the Daywalker, Merlin, the Professor, the Immortal and Muller the Pious, and we have a formidable enemy.’

‘I have fought and killed werewolves before,’ sneered Pavel. ‘They are no big deal.’

‘Perhaps not singularly, or even in pairs. But a full Pack, controlled by an Omega, that is a different story. Trust me, old friend, you do not want to come up against a force such as that without some form of preparation.’

‘I still think we…’ started Pavel.

Jebe cut him short with a growl. ‘Enough. The discussion is over. You will all do as I tell you, or you will suffer the consequences. I rode at the right hand of Genghis Kahn. At his side we conquered over thirty nations. After that I fought for the Roman Empire, then the Portuguese, the French. If I tell you something is necessary, accept it as such. And the next one of you who gainsays me will suffer my wrath.’

Pavel hung his head. He did not apologize, it was unnecessary. His silence spoke for him.

Jebe stared at the assemblage, daring anyone to speak out against him. No one did.

‘Good. This is how things are going to work. We will form teams consisting of one of the Chernobyl brethren, combined with five standard *Nosferatu* and ten grinders. Each of these teams will be known as a section. As well as this, I will add ten familiars to each section to take care of all daytime operations.

‘Each section will train together, stay together and hunt together until they become a well-oiled unit. Hadad has already compiled the

lists of who will go with who. Those lists can be found in the main ballroom.'

There was a frisson of noise and movement as all of the vampires present fell to their knees. Jebe turned to see Belikov entering the room. Arend had recently provided another coin and now the King was wearing 29 pieces of the almost-complete *Triginta* and the power radiated off him like a nuclear meltdown.

But although the relic was imparting power, it was in turn, taking a higher and higher toll on the Blood King as each day went by. His tumors were now constantly suppurating, his talons had grown to the point where he struggled to pick anything up, and his elongated fangs caused his speech to slur, making it difficult to understand. In return, however, he would be a formidable force in combat.

But words no longer seemed to matter. Because when he spoke, every utterance was golden. Like being washed by the moonlight. His wants and needs came across on a level far beyond that of mere speech. Spoken words were unnecessary, such was the power of his desires. The *Triginta* ensured whatever the Blood King wanted, his subjects would understand on a visceral level, and they would do all they could to satisfy him.

'I was just informing the brethren about the new Sections, my king,' informed Jebe.

Belikov burst out laughing for no apparent reason. The sound was beyond chilling. A mixture of insanity and pure unadulterated delight.

'Yes,' he shouted. 'Sections. Many sections. And we shall need them. For I have decided to take the hidden cities. *Pareen, Romeen* and *Cluj-Napoca* in Romania. You,' he pointed at Hadad. 'And Jebe, make a plan on how to do this. I think we shall start with *Pareen*. I've always had an abiding hatred for the French. They shall be the first to be crushed under the Blood King's heel. Yes, long may I live. Halleluiah and great praise upon me.'

'Long live the *Krov Tsar*,' shouted the brethren in unison, saluting by slamming their fists to their chests with an almost religious fervor.

Belikov twitched, stared blankly at the ceiling for a few seconds and then left the room, mumbling as he did so.

'Dismissed,' shouted Jebe. 'Go, look at the lists. Report back here tomorrow morning.'

The vampires filed out, leaving to follow Jebe's orders.

Hadad looked at Jebe and raised an eyebrow.

'No,' said Jebe. 'Don't go there. I'm serious.'

'The king is mad as a sack of frogs,' stated the scholar.

'I said, don't,' warned Jebe. 'Anyway, he is still my king. And yours. So, let us discuss how we are going to take *Pareen*.'

'Fine,' acknowledged Hadad. 'Seems like a pointless exercise to me,

but at least it shall prove entertaining.’

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CHAPTER 19

The Prof ran into the kitchen, his hair was awry and his face flushed with excitement.

'I've got him,' he shouted.

'Eureka,' joshed Troy.

'Got who?' asked Tag.

'That despicable elf. Arend. The fellow who has been tracking down the *Triginta* for the mad king.'

'How?' asked Merlin.

'I managed to find traces of his DNA left at one of the scenes. I have a friend in the Las Vegas police department. He managed to provide me with enough DNA to work a tracking spell. It's taken me a few days, but I know where he is.'

'Where?' asked Merlin as he stood up, his face like thunder.

'France.' The Prof walked over to a large map of Europe they had on the wall. He ran his finger along the map and then stopped, banging his fist on the spot. 'Right there.'

'Emily, Troy, Tag, with me. You too Professor. Quickly, ready yourselves, I'm going to portal us in with extreme prejudice.'

'What about me?' asked Muller.

Merlin shook his head. 'This Arend is a battlemage. Mortals are at too great a risk.'

'Any wolves?' asked Troy.

Merlin shook his head. 'Not necessary. And this is personal. I want to keep it between the inner circle.'

'But not me,' interjected Muller.

'Hey, we can't all be superheroes,' said Tag smugly.

'Enough, Tag,' snapped Merlin. 'Hurry, get whatever you all need as fast as possible. It's time for a reckoning.'

***

The portal swelled into existence, throbbing with energy as both Merlin and the Prof used huge amounts of power to transport five people across such a vast distance in an instant.

The team stepped through to find themselves outside a pleasant looking farmhouse. The windows were framed by blue wooden shutters, ivy crept up the walls and onto the clay tiled roof, and in the distance, rows of grape-vines covered the gently rolling hills.

But before anyone could comment on the view, the front door was blasted off its hinges, spiraling away across the garden like a giant Frisbee. Then two *Hulder* stepped out and started casting massive amounts of both ice-javelins and fireballs.

Merlin and the Prof threw up a hasty shield, angling it so the magical ordnance ricocheted off into the surrounding vineyards.

But Arend and Mist were no ordinary opponents. Both were highly skilled magical assassins, and Arend was most probably one of the deadliest warrior mages in the Fae kingdoms.

The volume of spells drove both Merlin and the Prof backwards, and the spillover of power struck Tag, Troy and Emily like a tidal wave, throwing them to the ground with great force.

Mist squared up to Emily, and with a gesture, launched a white-hot ball of plasma.

At the same time, Arend snapped off a flurry of razor-sharp ice daggers at her.

Emily managed to avoid the daggers, but as she leaped sideways, she laid herself open to the plasma.

At the last possible microsecond, Tag threw himself in front of the crackling ball of super-heated flame. The spell slammed into him like a molten freight train, smashing deep into his chest, burning his clothes and hair off in an instant and hammering him twenty feet backwards.

Mist let out a whoop of delight. 'Yes,' she shouted. 'Oh, I'm so sorry about your friend,' she sneered at Emily. 'Now it's time to join him.' She wound up another fireball, but was interrupted when Tag asked.

'Join him where?'

The spell sputtered out in the *Hulder's* hand as she stared open mouthed at the big man, sans shirt, eyebrows and most of his pants. 'But, what? How did you? That's impossible.'

And that logical fallacy was the last thought the combat mage ever had, as Emily lopped her head off with a swift blow from her ax, Deathwalker.

Meanwhile, Merlin and the Prof surrounded Arend with a double layer of impenetrable magical shielding. With a gesture, Merlin opened a small rent in the shield, just enough to allow Troy to insert his paw and slice deeply into the *Hulder* mage's stomach before withdrawing.

Arend sat cross legged on the ground, both hands clasped tightly to his gut as he attempted to prevent his innards boiling out through the savage wound.

The *Hulder* looked up at Merlin and the Prof, his eyes filled with hatred. 'It would have to be you two,' he grunted. 'Of all the gin joints in all the world, you had to walk into mine.' He laughed weakly and

then coughed, spraying blood from his mouth. ‘That line’s from Casablanca,’ he continued. ‘Good film that. Always wondered why the girl didn’t stay.’ He coughed again, bringing up more blood. ‘And to add insult to injury, I get killed by a damned dog.’ He looked at Troy. ‘Woof, Fido.’

‘The *Triginta*,’ snapped the Prof. ‘Do you have any of it here? And do you know where the rest of it is?’

Arend shook his head. ‘Gave that mad ugly vampire twenty-nine pieces so far. No idea where the last piece is. Do you?’

‘Why did you do it?’ asked Merlin. ‘You know what damage Belikov will do if he gets the entire set. Hell, he is most likely already close to impossible to stop.’

‘So?’ grunted Arend. ‘A few humans die. All humans die. What do I care? I am *Hulder*. Superior. And I am Fae.’

‘You are despicable,’ snapped Merlin.

Arend looked at the Prof. ‘He offered me the *Codex du Clos Luca.’*

The Prof did a double take. ‘Impossible,’ he whispered. ‘Leonardo da Vinci’s lost journals. They no longer exist. I should know, I have been searching for them for hundreds of years.’

‘They exist,’ replied Arend. ‘Now do you see why I did it? All that knowledge. Everything you and I live for. And it was almost in my grasp. I doubt even you could have resisted that offer, Professor.’

The Prof took a deep breath, then with an expansive gesticulation, he tore open the shielding and hammered a solid block of ice into Arend’s face. The block smashed the *Hulder’s* bones and brain matter to a pulp, throwing him onto his back and smearing the remains of his cranium across the lawn.

‘How dare he claim to have the same moral compass as me, insufferable elf,’ sneered the Prof.

Merlin raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

‘Let’s check the cottage out,’ interjected Emily. ‘See if there is any information we can use.’

‘Yeah,’ agreed Tag. ‘And maybe a shirt and pants. I’m feeling a little exposed right now.’

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CHAPTER 20

The gods had been spending less and less time with the team of hunters. Especially since the Pack had formed. To be fair, mortals bored them. As Merlin had oft pointed out, the gods were fickle, capricious and easily bored.

Latobias was the only one who regularly still spent any time at all with the group, drinking Tag's tea and helping out with transport whenever needed.

At the moment, Merlin was sitting opposite the Celtic god, puffing on his pipe.

'I have to see Grannus,' said the wizard. 'I will need your help. I am not capable of opening a portal across the Atlantic.'

'Fly or portal?' asked Latobias. 'I can get you there in ten minutes.'

'Portal. It will just be the two of us.'

'Not a problem,' assured the Celtic god. 'But it won't do you any good.'

'You don't even know why I'm going,' returned Merlin.

'I can guess. You want Grannus to help find the last piece of the *Triginta* before Belikov gets his hands on it.'

'Good guess,' conceded Merlin. 'Grannus is the only one of us gifted enough in that area to do it. But why do you say it will do me no good?'

Latobias shrugged. 'Grannus has always been, and will always continue to be, a proper pain in the butt. I am the first to admit, as gods, we can all be a mite selfish, but Grannus takes that to a new level. At the moment, he has his own little fiefdom set up. A gang of worshippers, luxury, power, albeit not much. Still, he is better off than he has been for millennia.' Latobias shook his head. 'You won't get any joy out of him.'

'I have to try.'

'Sure,' agreed Latobias. 'We can go as soon as I finish my tea.'

'Thank you.'

***

'I am a god,' bellowed Grannus. 'How dare you waltz into my domain and demand I join you in this insignificant quest?'

Latobias looked out of the window, enjoying the sunlight that poured in. Apart from his physical presence it was as if he were not

there. He didn't greet Grannus. Nor engage him in any manner. In fact, he hadn't even looked at him since they had stepped through the portal.

Merlin, on the other hand, was giving the god of Bling his full attention.

'Oh, lighten up, you miserable dwarf,' Merlin yelled. 'You're barely a *godling*, let alone a full-blown *god*. Hell, I've been in elevators with more people than worship you.'

Grannus went purple with rage. 'How dare you?' he shouted.

'Repeating yourself, old boy,' answered Merlin.

Latobias gave a slight grin, showing he was paying more attention than he wanted to let on.

'Look out of that window,' continued the god of Bling. 'Cast your gaze upon my people. My. People. There are over a hundred of them now. And this is just the beginning. For countless years, I lurked on the periphery of human worship. Forgotten. Reduced to little more than a side note in history. And now, I'm on my way back.'

'Grannus,' said Merlin, holding both hands up in a placating manner. 'I'm not saying forget the whole worship thing, all I am asking is that you put aside some time to search for the last piece of the *Triginta*. You have a specific gift, and look at it this way, it is the ultimate piece of Bling. And you can keep it. Just don't let the Blood King get a hold of it.'

Grannus thought for a few seconds, then he shook his head, 'No. There's not really much in it for me.'

'You would be helping humanity.'

'Screw humanity,' snapped Grannus. 'They ignored me for centuries, why should I help them now?'

Merlin scowled. 'You are a pathetic excuse for … well, whatever it is you think you are,' he said, his voice dripping with scorn. 'Come, Latobias. Take me away from this sniveling pile of goat-turd.'

'You go too far, wizard,' roared Grannus.

Merlin turned to face the god. He moved slowly, almost reluctantly, as if he were forcing himself to do something he might regret.

'No,' he said softly, his voice barely even a whisper. 'I do not go far enough. And that is due to the respect and awe I once held you in. You and your fellow pantheon were created out of mankind's belief. You exist for one reason only, to serve those who created you.

'Instead, you turn your back on them. And I shall take this opportunity to explain something to you, Grannus, little godling. While you spent millennia whining about your fate, bemoaning your lack of worship, sniveling and blubbering like a spoilt toddler – I, Myrddin Ambrosius Caerfyrddin Syvestris Wyllt, the first and only of that name, did toil, and study, and endure. And I have grown in

power in ways you will never perceive.

'Now, in all but name, *I* am a god. A god of wrath. A god of vengeance. A god of protection and retribution. And look at you, a fairground charlatan. Lapping up these deluded people's worship like a dog begging for kitchen scraps. You disgust me. Come, Latobias, let us leave before I become truly angry.'

Latobias activated the portal and whisked them from Grannus's presence.

The new god of Bling walked over to the window and stared out, noting well the wealth around him.

As well he noted the mindless morons that worshiped him. Vacant, dull, idiots.

He shook his head. 'I don't care,' he whispered to himself. 'That wizard has no idea what it is like to spend so long in the wilderness.'

He clenched his fists. 'I don't care,' he repeated.

But the expression on his face belied his words.

***

Merlin exited the portal and strode into the kitchen.

'Where are Belenas and Sirona?' he bellowed.

Tag pointed outside. 'Went for a walk. I think.'

'Find them. Bring them to me. Now!'

Tag obeyed with alacrity, taking Merlin's mood as a good reason not to ask questions.

Minutes later he returned with the two gods.

'What's the rush?' asked Belenas. 'We were having a post-prandial stroll. You had better have a good reason for summoning us like that. After all …'

Merlin held up his right hand. 'Shuttup, Belenas. I've had enough.'

Belenas was about to reply when he caught Latobias's eye. The Celtic god gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head. It wasn't much, but it was enough.

For there are certain places where even angels fear to tread. Let alone minor gods.

'You and Sirona will continue the search for the remaining piece of the *Triginta*,' snapped Merlin. 'Start now. I want you gone within the hour.'

'I take it, Grannus didn't want to help?' interjected Sirona.

Merlin cast a cold eye on her, and she took a step back and bowed her head.

'Come,' said Latobias. 'I shall help you prepare.'

The three gods left the room.

'Tea?' asked Tag.

Merlin nodded. 'Thank you.'

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CHAPTER 21

Contrary to popular belief, Trolls do not live under bridges. Well, not many of them at any rate. No more than humans do.

Actually, little is known about them as a species. They breed very rarely, are essentially solitary creatures and, regardless of what Tolkien wrote about them, are not inherently stupid or violent. Well, once again, no more than humans are.

Zogbanner, or simply Zog to the few who knew him well enough to talk to him, was eight hundred and twenty-two years old. Or maybe he was nine hundred and twenty-two. Trolls didn't care much about birthdays. And he had been living in the hidden city of *Pareen* for at least half of that time.

A hundred years or so before he moved to *Pareen*, Zog discovered a mountain stream in Scandinavia, his place of birth. Hidden in an inaccessible mountain range, far from prying eyes and human contact. The bed of the stream had been covered in large nuggets of pure gold. Thousands of them.

Zog had patiently gathered up every last one – and never had to work again.

As such, he spent his time in *Pareen* caring for the only things he truly considered to be his friends. The hundreds of thousands of cats that covered the city. *Pareen's* early warning system against both vampires and werewolves.

It was every resident's duty to ensure the cats were well fed and watered, but Zog went further than that. He actively searched for any felines that had gotten ill, or injured. And, over time, hundreds of years, the cats had come to see him as The Protector. Even more, perhaps even as their leader. In as far as cats will even contemplate the concept of one leading over all.

It had gotten to a stage where Zog could communicate with them, both singularly and collectively through an almost Pack mind. Not complex issues, but emotions, wants, needs and feelings.

That was why Zog was the first being in *Pareen* to know the hidden city was being assaulted.

A frisson of anger, overlaid by fear, rippled through the feline population. Thousands of minds linked and pulsed out the unmistakable cry – *They are here*.

And from the overlying feelings of disgust the cats put out, Zog knew who *they* were.

Nosferatu.

'How many?' he asked as he began to run for the center of the city. He needed to find one of the elders to warn the general populace. Although he suspected by the time he had done so, it would be too late. The cats would have already made the incursion public knowledge.

Cats do not count. Their concept of numbers went from, *mine*, through to *all mine* and finally *enough to share*.

The concept of *enough to share* came through to Zog. This was no incursion; this was a full-scale invasion. Because, for a cat to acknowledge there is *enough to share*, means there must be hundreds.

'Why?' wondered the Troll as he ran. 'Why would the vampires attack? Especially as there was no way they could win. The unseen cities were full of battle mages, wizards, Fae warriors and even human assassins and soldiers. Even a couple of hundred *Nosferatu* would be hopelessly outnumbered.'

Sprinting towards the town square, Zog heard the cacophony begin as the cats gave tongue to their displeasure.

Yowling, howling, screeching and growling. Thousands upon thousands of cats wailed out their warnings.

It gave a new meaning to the word – caterwauling.

By the time Zog got to the square, the battle had already begun.

There were a score of *Nosferatu* fighting in the streets around the square. Assisting them were at least fifty armed human familiars. However, Zog could hear, via the cats, that this was but one attack. There were at least another three dotted around the city, all of them fairly close to the square.

Although many Pareen residents lay bleeding out on the street, Zog could see three familiars and one vampire had been vanquished. One particular Fae battle mage was casting fireballs with a rapidity Zog had never seen before, and he was causing a lot of damage. Unfortunately, he was also causing a fair amount of collateral damage to the surrounding architecture.

But the most surprising part of the battle was the cats. Not only were they voicing their displeasure vocally, they were also attacking the intruders. With no seeming care for their own safety, hundreds and hundreds of felines were throwing themselves at both vampire and familiars alike. Small, spitting, scratching, biting furry balls of fury. Howling and yowling as they hissed and spat.

Zog saw one vampire go down under so many cats, all that was visible was a heaving mountain of fur and claws.

He didn't get back up. Death by a thousand, thousand cuts.

Picking up one of the statues of various mythical creatures that lined the square, Zog proceeded to use it like a club, smashing any

enemy he could. He had reasonable success with the familiars, beating three to death before he came up against his first *Nosferatu*.

His speed and coordination were no match for the bloodsucker. Each time he swung; the vampire was no longer there. After a few attempts, the vamp went on the attack, gouging a deep wound across Zog's chest. Then he followed with a slash across his right calf.

The cut went so deep that Zog could no longer put any weight on his right leg, and had to hop away frantically, swinging the statue in front of him to keep the vampire at bay.

The vampire did a slight double take. 'Hey,' he asked. 'Isn't that a sculpture of Orion?'

Zog glanced at his makeshift club. 'Umm…yes, I think so.'

'Wasn't he the god of pee?'

'No,' argued Zog. 'That's not true. He was created by Zeus in a sacrificial bull's hide filled with urine. That doesn't make him the god of pee.'

The vampire shook his head. 'Hell, no,' he exclaimed. 'There is no way I'm going to the true death, courtesy of a Troll wielding a statue of the god of piss.'

He launched himself at Zog.

At the same time, the Troll fell sideways and a herd of angry cats leaped onto the vampire, figuratively, but not literally, dog-piling him.

Zog staggered forward, raised his statue and called out. 'Make room,' he said. 'Going for a blow to the head.'

The cats peeled back from the vampire's head and Zog brough the stone statue down. Again. And again. Until there was less cranium and more, crimson on the cobbles.

'Take that, you pussy,' he grunted.

The cats yowled in resentment.

'No. no, not you guys,' explained Zog. 'The headless, pee-phobic boy.'

Then he tore the sleeve of his shirt off and used it to bind his leg as tightly as he could. 'Oh well, time to go beat some more miscreants to death.'

He shouldered his statue of Orion and limped on.

***

Elder Thomas, leader of the Fae quarter held his hand up. 'Reform,' he commanded. 'Melee fighters to the front, archers and ranged casters to the rear. Advance by numbers, keep a lookout for any stragglers.'

The line of defenders moved forward. Every now and then a lone vampire would launch himself out of one of the side roads, attacking with teeth and talon. But most of those attacks were forewarned by the yowling of the cats. Each attack managed to take down four or

five defenders, occasionally more, before they were dispatched under a deluge of swords, axes, arrows and spells.

Sometimes a group of armed familiars would erupt from behind a building, but their attacks were repulsed with ease, and barely a loss of life.

Zog's leg was still hindering him, but a kindly wizard had cast a healing spell on it, so he was able to contribute to the defense of his beloved city.

And his cats.

Slowly, the *Pareen* residents were gaining the upper hand. It was a war of attrition. Costly, but winnable.

A final group of five *Nosferatu* lined up across the main street leading from the central parts of the city. But as the defenders approached, the vamps fell back.

Until, as one, they turned and ran.

'Yes,' shouted Thomas the elder. 'We have them on the run. Altogether now, let's put an end to this.'

The crowd of defenders started to run.

The chase was on.

But Zog hesitated. The vampires were retreating into the Dark Zone. The forbidden area of the city.

The parts of *Pareen* that had been all but abandoned since the great fire.

An area of darkness, of ghouls and goblins and soul-eaters.

After all, there was a reason it was called, the Dark Zone.

'Wait,' he shouted.

But it was no use. The hunt was on and the hounds were baying.

With a sigh of resignation, Zog shouldered his statue once more and followed his fellow citizens into the night.

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CHAPTER 22

Paval Molotov surveyed the approaching residents of *Pareen* and shook his head in disbelief.

'What is it?' asked Arseny, his first lieutenant, also an elder of the Chernobyl clan.

'When Jebe and Hadad put this plan of attack together, I had no faith in it at all,' he answered. 'I mean, who would follow an enemy into an area that obviously and quite openly screams ambush?'

Arseny shrugged. 'We attacked, allowed them to push us back. Although many of them are powerful, they are not seasoned warriors, so now they are totally overconfident. Exactly as the scholar said they would be. They have fallen into our trap like toddlers being bribed with candy. Idiots, all of them. Now they will get to face the true might of the Blood King's Chernobyl warriors.'

'As well as over a hundred Grinders,' added Pavel. 'Here they come. Remember, let them get well into the Dark Zone before we spring the trap.'

Arseny grinned, a truly horrifying expression when set on his ruined and tumor-ridden face. 'I must say, I am truly looking forward to this. What a feast.'

Pavel nodded in agreement. 'A feast indeed.'

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CHAPTER 23

‘Latobias,’ shouted Merlin. ‘Prepare the chopper, there are too many of us to portal. Troy, get the three Alpha’s plus three of your best fighters to report immediately. Emily, Muller, with me. Tag, get missus Jones, meet us at the helicopter. Move like your lives depend on it. I’ll explain on board.’

Just over a minute later, the helicopter hammered into the night sky, heading for Paris.

‘Pere Lachaise cemetery,’ barked Merlin.

‘ETA ten minutes,’ responded Latobias laconically.

‘*Pareen* is under attack by vampires,’ continued Merlin. ‘One of my contacts there got hold of me urgently a few minutes ago. We’re heading there to help. If we’re in time. The Pere Lachaise cemetery has an emergency access to the hidden city.’

‘Not sure if they will welcome a bunch of werewolves and the Daywalker into *Pareen*,’ noted Troy. ‘Last I heard, we were *persona non grata*.’

‘I hope to make the elders see reason,’ replied Merlin. ‘I have already told my contact to have a city representative meet us at the entrance.’

Muller snorted. ‘Good luck with that.’

Exactly ten minutes later, Latobias landed next to the tomb of Edith Piaf. The team debussed and ran to the concealed trapdoor behind the tomb.

Following Merlin’s instructions, Tag lifted the slab and heaved it to one side to reveal a well-lit flight of stone steps.

Merlin led the way and the rest of the team ran down behind him. The landing opened up to a corridor that curved sharply to the left. At the end of that corridor was large room. Standing at the opposite end of the room was a group of ten. Fae, humans, a boggart a dwarf and a brownie.

There were no cats.

One of the elder Fae women stepped forward. ‘Halt,’ she demanded. ‘Your sort are not welcome here,’ she declared.

‘What sort?’ growled Tag.

The elder looked at the big man with disdain. ‘Vampires and werewolves.’

‘Firstly,’ stated Merlin. ‘There are no vampires here.’

She looked pointedly at Emily.

‘Emily is the Daywalker,’ snapped Merlin. ‘She is no blood sucker. And secondly, it’s a bit late, don’t you think? What with the city already been flooded with vampires? We have come to help, and I put it to you, right now werewolves are your only hope.’

‘Enough,’ shouted the elder. ‘It’s your whole werewolf, vampire obsession that has caused all of this. That’s why we don’t allow your sort in.’

‘There she goes again with the, *your sort* thing,’ said Tag. ‘You watch your mouth old lady; I’ve had about all I can take with your sort.’

‘Please,’ scoffed Merlin. ‘There is no proof this has anything to do with the ongoing war we have against the blood suckers. This is a different thing entirely. The Blood King seeks to take over the world. And he is starting with the supernaturals. As I have already stated, we can help. And we may very well be your only hope.’

There was a collective chuckle from the group of elders.

‘No thank you, wizard,’ interjected the dwarf. ‘We are doing quite fine by ourselves. Actually, your arrogance astounds me. Do you have any concept of the combined power of the residents of *Pareen*?’

‘Yes, unfortunately I do,’ replied Merlin. ‘And I know for a fact you cannot stand against these vampires. They are a new breed. More powerful, crueler and more committed than any we have fought before. Plus, their leader wields the *Triginta*. Not all of it, yet. But he is close.’

‘Pish and scorn. Old wife’s tales and rubbish,’ sneered the female elder.

Merlin sighed and shook his head. ‘It always amazes me that there seems to be a finite limit to intelligence, but stupidity has no bounds.’

‘Wait,’ said Emily. ‘Are you saying you have defeated the vamps?’

The elders look shifty, avoiding eye contact.

‘Yes, well, not as such,’ prevaricated the Dwarf. ‘But it will not be long. We have them surrounded in the Dark Zone. We are readying our guards and our battle mages as we speak. They attack in mere minutes.’

‘You seek to attack the vampires while they are in the Dark Zone?’ shouted Emily in disbelief. ‘Are you insane or simply stupid? You will be playing to their strengths. Pull them out. Do it now.’

The elder’s sneered at Emily.

‘I think you should leave, Daywalker,’ said the Dwarf. ‘As we have already said, you are not welcome here.’

‘Idiot,’ responded Emily, her voice like ice. ‘How many warriors are you sending in?’

‘Not that it has anything to do with you,’ stated the Dwarf. ‘But over sixty.’

‘I hope you can live with their deaths on your conscience, you

absolutely vile excuse for a leader.' Emily turned to Merlin. 'Come, let us take our leave.'

With heavy hearts, the team turned and left.

***

Zog knew he was dying. And there was nothing he could do about it.

The advance into the Dark Zone had been the beginning of the end of *Pareen*.

No sooner had the defenders got deep into the zone, the *Nosferatu* launched their counter-attack. And it was as if every nightmare ever had come to life.

The monsters that came out of the dark were like nothing Zog had seen before. Massive, lumpen and deformed, they attacked without remorse nor mercy.

And behind them came a horde of gibbering, slobbering Grinders. Brain-burned and deadly.

The monster vamps scythed through the *Pareen* defenders like they were a fluffle of rabbits.

Zog tried his very best to fight back, swinging hard and not backing down. But it was like trying to beat back an avalanche. The monsters didn't even make an attempt to dodge his blows, they simply took them as if he were a starling flapping his wings at them. As opposed to a seven-foot-tall Troll, weighing in at four hundred pounds and wielding a two-hundred-pound statue.

And now Zog lay in the dark. Crippled and dying. His right leg almost torn off; his left arm shattered to the point it seemed boneless. A sucking hole in his chest through which his breath gurgled like a draining bath tub.

Afraid.

Friendless.

Alone.

The first cat stalked silently out of the darkness, nestled up against the Troll and purred.

Then another.

And another.

Hundreds upon hundreds.

Within minutes, all Zog could hear was the thunder of purring. And all he could feel was the vibration of their last farewell.

Their ode to a friend.

And he was no longer afraid.

***

Hubris.

The ancient Greeks coined the phrase – excessive pride towards, or

defiance of the gods, leading to one's own nemesis.

The definition could now just as well read – A group of overconfident Elders who turned down an offer of help and caused the enslavement of an entire city.

Rows of Fae, Dwarves, Brownies, humans and Hulder sat on the floor in chains. Each one manacled to the next with specially enchanted shackles, designed by Hadad.

Null-shackles.

They prevented any mage from casting, or any shape changer to shift.

Scores and scores of bodies littered the streets, which now ran red, green and purple with the blood of the various fallen.

The Chernobyl vamps had retired to the town hall, using it ostensibly for a feeding area. Already, the exsanguinated corpses were stacked high outside the hall. Throats torn open; wrists slashed. Like so much offal. Mere detritus.

Over a hundred more *Nosferatu* were patrolling the streets, each holding long leashes attached to four, five or even six Grinders. Like packs of rabid dogs, howling, spitting, gibbering and screeching. Broken, insane vampiric sub-humans.

Jebe stood next to Hadad. They were the only two Chernobyl vamps that had not retired to the feeding hall. As yet.

'Can you cast a scrying spell of some sort so I can contact the king?' Jebe asked the scholar.

Hadad shook his head and sighed. 'Don't be such a luddite, Jebe,' he snorted. 'Use a damn cell phone.'

Jebe frowned. 'Oh, yes. Of course.'

'Sometimes,' mumbled Hadad as he handed his phone to the general. 'I really don't know.'

Jebe dialed, and informed the Blood King that *Pareen* was now under his control.

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CHAPTER 24

‘No,’ argued Ursula. ‘The French are obsessed with butter. Everything they cook has butter in it. And the Italians, pasta. German food is the best.’

‘At least we’re not obsessed with pigs,’ countered Lorenzo. ‘I wonder if you bunch could make any dish without industrial quantities of swine being involved?’

‘You’re a pig,’ snapped Ursula.

‘Hey,’ interjected Tag. ‘Remember the not being an ass rule.’

Lorenzo chuckled. ‘Who, me or her?’

‘Both of you, actually,’ replied Tag.

‘Order,’ commanded Merlin, as he tapped the table with his pipe to attract attention. ‘Settle down. Now, you all know what happened in *Pareen*.’

The hunters nodded. Merlin had called a meeting of the Alphas and the original team to brief them on what was happening next.

‘They are going to hit *Romeen* or *Cluj* next,’ said Merlin. ‘I am sure of it.’

‘Why?’ asked Emily.

‘I know the Blood King of old,’ answered Merlin. ‘He was always a little unbalanced. Now with the effects of the *Triginta* coursing through him, I suspect he has gone totally insane. Drunk with power and driven by the need for more. He wants to take over the world. Well, we shall stop him so he won’t, but that is his end game. The Prof and I agree, one of the hidden cities are most likely the next target. He has always fostered a hatred for them, ever since they banned the Pack and the *Nosferatu* from entering.’

‘I’m still worried about the Morrigan,’ said Emily. ‘Do you think she is involved with this?’

‘Most likely,’ answered Merlin. ‘But I would guess, only in a peripheral way. She was definitely behind the debacle you led against the vamps that killed Quinton and his men. But this mad rush for power, she will encourage it, as it brings war and bloodshed and those are her stock in trade. But the actual attacks will not concern her until it provides her with a way to strike at you again’.

‘And you,’ added Emily.

Merlin nodded. ‘Yes,’ he conceded. ‘And me.’

‘Cool, so what do we do?’ asked Tag.

‘We wait,’ answered Merlin. ‘I have contacts in both of the hidden

cities. The moment something goes down, Latobias will have us there in ten minutes.'

'If we're going to take everyone, including the Pack, I need a bigger helicopter,' interjected Latobias.

'Can you organize that yourself?' asked Merlin.

'Sure. I'm thinking maybe a Chinook.'

'Whatever, just do it. The rest of you, continue with your training. It won't be long and we are all going to get up close and personal to these mega-vamps.'

'BUMF's,' exclaimed Tag

'BUMF's?' enquired Lorenzo with a puzzled frown.

'Yeah,' chuckled Tag. 'Big Ugly M …'

'Big Ugly Man Feeders,' interrupt the Prof.

'No,' said Tag, shaking his head. 'Big Ug…'

'Come on, Tag,' laughed Emily. 'Let's go.'

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CHAPTER 25

‘We’re up,’ shouted Merlin.

Troy threw his head back and howled. The pack returned the call, sprinting towards the rendezvous point, next to the open area where Latobias landed his military surplus CHF-47 Chinook. A massive, double rotor helicopter painted in dun brown.

The pack ran on board, strapping themselves in at speed. The Italians took a little longer, as they had to grab their weapons and stock up with the new silver ammunition the Prof had made for them.

But it was mere seconds, not minutes before the rotors were spinning and Latobias threw them into the air.

‘I assume it’s *Romeen*?’ the Celtic god shouted.

‘You assume correctly,’ answered Merlin.

‘Welcome to Celtic air,’ smirked Latobias. ‘ETA of flight never-never is…’

The entire pack chimed in at once.

‘Ten minutes.’

They arrived at the *Campo Verano* cemetery and Latobias flared out and dropped them to the ground like a condor coming home to roost.

‘Why’s the entrances always in cemeteries?’ asked Tag.

‘So no one stumbles across them,’ answered the Prof. ‘Not a lot of foot traffic in these secluded areas.’

Merlin cast a glamor over the helicopter as the hunters debussed. It wouldn’t make the massive machine invisible, but it would convince people to simply look the other way. They would see it, but they wouldn’t care. A look-away spell.

The wizard led them to a concealed stone doorway behind the tomb. But standing there, ready and waiting, were six human guards. All were armed with AA-12 automatic shotguns with 32-round drum magazines. Incredibly destructive weapons.

One of them stepped forward. ‘Greetings, sirs. I must apologize, but the Elders have told us to prevent entry to yourselves. No werewolves, no vampires and as of now, no Merlin.’

Merlin shook his head in amazement. ‘You do know you are under attack by vampires as we speak?’

The guard looked decidedly embarrassed. ‘Yes, sir,’ he admitted. ‘However, this comes from the top. And it has been ratified by the Elders from *Pareen* as well.’

‘You idiot,’ snapped Merlin. ‘Those elders are now under the control

of the Blood King. As is the entirety of *Pareen*. And if you don't let us in, the same fate will befall you.'

The guard looked hesitant. It was obvious he thought his superiors to be a bunch of imbeciles. But rules were rules, and it was well above his pay grade to interfere.

Muller, however, stepped forward. 'Carlos,' he said. 'Is that you?'

The head guard did a double take. 'Captain Muller? They told us you were dead.'

'Obviously not true,' snapped Muller. 'Now, what are members of the Holy See doing here? You are Knights of God, not some sort of glorified doormen.' He turned to the others. 'Alex. Neil. Petrus. Bartholomew. Zaharias. You were all the best of the best, what happened?'

The group of ex-knights looked shame-faced.

Finally, Carlos answered. 'Captain, we could no longer take the humiliation. The new Pope, may he live forever…'

'Amen,' chorused Muller and the rest of the guards.

'He downgraded us to mere bodyguards. Runners and servants. We resigned our positions and sought work in the unseen community. We thought we might at least then still get an opportunity to fight the great evil we have been trained to fight.'

Muller put his hand on Carlos's shoulder. 'And now you can, my friend,' he said. 'Once before I led you into battle against the darkness, do me the honor of following me into hell once more. The city of *Romeen* is being attacked by the direst of evil, and you, these hunters, and I are all that can stop them.'

Lorenzo stepped forward. 'I urge you to listen to the Pious,' he said. 'Do not forget, he is no mere Knight. He is the only living being to have been awarded *the Supreme Order of Christ* and *the Order of Saint Sylvester and the Golden Militia*. He was the left hand of the Pope, bless his name.'

Carlos stared at Muller for a few seconds, then without preamble, he took a knee. 'Command us, Captain.'

The rest of the Knights followed their lieutenant.

'Command us, Pious one,' they said together.

'Yes,' said Tag. 'Muller's Marauders.'

The new enlarged team of hunters ran down the stairs towards the city, moving as fast as they could.

'Darn stairs,' muttered Tag. 'Missus Jones hates stairs.'

As always, the staggering beauty of *Romeen* filled Emily with wonder as they exited the stairway into the city cavern itself. Stalactites made of the purest crystal hung from the roof, refracting and reflecting the magical globe-lights in a thousand different ways. An orgy of rainbows flooded the air, and the buildings were picked

out in a multihued palette of colors, like life as seen through a stain glassed window. The result was beyond breathtaking.

But this time the beauty was marred with the scenes of absolute destruction and devastation taking place.

There were running battles in the streets. Fireballs crashing and soaring through the firmament. Roaring trolls and ogres wielding clubs and maces. Magicians and *Hulder* casting battle spells, Fae warriors unleashing slings and arrows.

Grinders, *Nosferatu* and Familiars, killing with great glee and abandon.

Innocent civilians of all races and species, screaming and running and dying.

Insanity.

And above it all, the yowling of over a hundred thousand cats. Emily noted some vamps almost buried under squalling, spitting felines as they defended their territory with their very lives.

'Group up into your attack teams,' yelled Troy as he changed into his wolfman mode. 'Remember your training. You come up against any BUMF's, hamstring, back of neck. Never the front. Don't let me down. Pack.'

'Pack,' roared the wolves.

Troy turned to Emily. 'I reckon you and I are a team. Muller, you, Tag and the Knights do your thing. No need for me to interfere, you're trained for this crap.'

'I'm on it,' responded the Knight.

Troy glanced at Merlin and the Prof.

'Oh, don't mind us old men,' said Merlin. 'I'm sure we shall be able to amuse ourselves.'

'Let's do this,' roared Troy.

The Pack morphed into their wolf forms, apart from the Italians who decided to go armed and dangerous instead.

The hunt was on.

***

Ursula led her team of three wolves across the city square, heading towards a group of two *Nosferatu* and six Grinders.

The vamps and their Grinders had ganged up against a pair of Ogres. One male, one female. Like most mountain Ogres, the couple were around seven feet tall, built like beer barrels with thickly muscled, stubby arms and legs. The female could be identified as such because, unlike the male, her tusks were smaller and sharper. The male's tusks protruded from his bottom jaw, almost to his nose.

Both wielded traditional Ogre clubs. Massive hunks of oak, studded with iron bolts.

And they were getting the holy crap kicked out of them.

Both the *Nosferatu* and the Grinders, while being no match in strength, were far too fast for the Ogres to hit, and both were bleeding profusely from scores of deep cuts and bites.

'No BUMF's,' noted Ursula, communicating to her team via her mental Pack connection. 'We can take this lot head on.'

The four werewolves split into two pairs. One pair hit the Grinders, while Ursula and her designated partner, Jurgen, attacked the two *Nosferatu*.

As soon as the Grinders were attacked, they turned their attention towards the wolves.

Big mistake.

With their gaze elsewhere, they were no longer in a position to dodge the Ogres. And a one-hundred-pound, iron studded, tree-trunk-sized club can do an inordinate amount of damage when wielded by four hundred pounds of muscle.

Between the wolves and the Ogres, the Grinders were reduced to a half dozen stains on the cobbles within seconds. Then they all turned on the two remaining *Nosferatu*.

But there was no real need, as Ursula had already dispatched one and Jurgen was busy tearing the second vamps throat out. The male Ogre swung his club, and squished the vamps head with a single blow.

Then he nodded to Ursula, picking her out as the Alpha. 'Thank you,' he said, his voice rumbling like distant thunder. 'Mind if we stick with you? We good at hitting stuff, but not if it keeps moving about.'

Ursula nodded. It wouldn't hurt to have a couple of tanks in her team.

Together, the new improved team went searching for their next victims.

***

'Well, what have we here?' sneered the lead *Nosferatu*. 'A group of humans. With guns. How sweet.'

The rest of the brethren, another two vampires, laughed.

The ten grinders gibbered and cackled like rabid hyenas.

'*Questo è un uomo molto stupido*,' sighed Lorenzo. 'This is a very stupid man.'

The two other werewolves chuckled.

'What?' snapped the lead vamp.

'You,' answered Lorenzo. 'How stupid are you? Can't tell the difference between a human and a werewolf.'

The three werewolves swept back their black coats, drew their Spectre submachine guns and their Storm semiauto pistols.

As one they opened fire, all aiming at the lead vamp's head. Even in human form, a werewolf's speed and dexterity is beyond superhuman. The combined weapons poured out over fifty .45 caliber rounds a second.

The wolves gave the lead vamp a precise one second burst each. Fifteen rounds each from their submachine guns, and four rounds from their pistols.

Vampires can regenerate and heal at a quite phenomenal rate. However, they need to have a head to do so. And over fifty, well aimed, silver coated slugs entering the cranium in under a single second will pretty much ensure the aforementioned head ceases to exist.

Before the creature's body had struck the floor, the next vamp had already been shortened by the length of a head, and the wolves were reloading, ramming fresh magazines into both pistols and submachine guns.

And they did so at great speed. Faster than the eye could see.

Even that infinitesimally small amount of time, mere microseconds, was enough for the remaining vamp and his Grinders to go on the offensive. They blurred forward, talons outstretched and mouth agape, baring their fangs. Ready to strike.

But this was not the Italian's first rodeo. Not by far.

As they reloaded, they also took two steps back at the same time. All of this happened at a speed that defied normal human senses. And two steps are not much, but in the microseconds of supernatural mortal combat, it is just enough time to bring a weapon to bear and pull the trigger.

The final *Nosferatu* went down, followed by one of the Grinders. And that pretty much marked the end of the contest, as Grinders, while being fast, strong and incredibly vicious, are about as dumb as a box of hammers.

Within seconds, the wolves had filled the remaining brain-burnt vamps with enough silver to put them to sleep.

Eternally.

***

Armand loped through the darkness of the *Romeen* back streets. His two wolven partners at his flanks. They had heard a female voice crying for help and were rushing to do just that.

Charging around a corner, they were confronted by the sight of three *Nosferatu* and four Grinders. All looming over a young Fae woman, clutching a baby to her chest. Blood ran down her face from a cut across her forehead, and more soaked her dress from an obvious wound in her side.

The three massive wolves didn't even slow their pace as they threw themselves into the group of blood suckers, teeth and claws cutting, and crushing. The combat took place at such speed, it literally looked like a whirlwind of blood and fur and torn clothing.

The wolves used their speed and agility to keep moving. Bite, move, claw, jump back, bite again.

The Grinders were less agile, but they had no regard for their own lives. In a way, this made them more dangerous than their more cogent brethren.

Armand tasked his two partners to take on the Grinders while he kept the three *Nosferatu* busy. He didn't try to take any of them out, rather he wanted to keep them occupied until the other two wolves had dispatched the Grinders.

Trusting his partners to do their job, Armand moved around the trio of *Nosferatu*, snapping and withdrawing. Feinting, moving in a random pattern.

He sensed a wave of victory from the other two wolves and he knew the Grinders were down. Pulsing a thought, he attacked. As did the other two wolves. They did not take one vamp each, instead, two attacked one, while Armand kept the other two engaged.

And one vamp against two werewolves pretty much always ends with the same outcome.

One truly dead bloodsucker.

Seven seconds later, the three wolves turned on the last vamp, tearing him to shreds. Then they turned to the Fae woman and her baby.

She nodded. Armand returned the gesture.

Then, using his nose to nudge her, he guided her to an open door while the other two wolves searched the house.

It was empty. Safe. Armand pushed the woman inside and pulled the door shut with his teeth.

She would be out of harm's way for now.

Turning, he howled once, and the three of them went looking for more vamps to exterminate.

***

Muller led the way, Tag by his right hand. And fanned out equally on each side, the six other Knights of the Holy See, their automatic shotguns at the ready.

Unlike the wolves, Muller and his team moved at a slow and steady pace. Each step forward only placed after checking and rechecking every shadow, every movement, every possible ambush.

But despite the fact that they were moving with such care, they still moved at a fair speed. Heading towards the closest sounds of violence.

And when the Knights and Tag struck out, it was less a maelstrom of destruction like the wolves, and more a methodical, grinding execution. The implacability of a glacier, as opposed to the sudden onrush of a tsunami.

Muller had been pleasantly surprised to find the Knights all carried silver coated buckshot, as was the unit's custom before the Holy Father deemed vampires to be not-real. The inclusion of silver into the weapons ensured the Knights were now a formidable foe indeed.

The first group of opposition they came up against consisted of four *Nosferatu* and six Grinders. They were busy feeding on a mixed group of Fae and humans.

'Stand firm,' commanded Muller. 'Left flank, five rounds each, by the numbers. Right flank, the same, Tag, hold your fire, we're going to need missus Jones later.'

The Knights brought their weapons to bear, sighted and fired. A precise one second burst at each vamp's or Grinder's center mass. They worked their way inwards. Fire, move, fire, move without pause.

Three seconds later two brethren and four Grinders were twitching on the floor. Muller quickly fired a single shot into each, aiming at the center of their foreheads.

The remaining two *Nosferatu* and the pair of Grinders attacked. But before they could take more than a couple of steps, the thunderous roar of the minigun ripped the air apart, literally tearing the remaining undead in twain.

Muller turned to look disapprovingly at Tag.

The big man shrugged. 'Sorry,' he said. 'Missus Jones has sometimes got a mind of her own. It's this whole *me-too* thing she got going on.'

'Keep the rest of your ammo for the BUMF's,' said Muller.

Tag looked slightly embarrassed. 'Sure, will do.'

***

Troy and Emily moved amongst the fires and the shadows with such grace and skill it was impossible to tell they were there. They had already found and dispatched three *Nosferatu* and eight Grinders.

Now they were hunting again.

Ghosting across the roofs they came across their next victims. Four vampires with only two Grinders. The rest of the Grinders were lying dead on the cobbles, burned almost beyond recognition.

A single human mage stood before the group of vamps, brandishing an oak staff, the end of which flickered a ball of flame.

'Fire mage,' pulsed Troy. 'No wonder he's managed to burn all those Grinders.'

'You want some more?' shouted the mage, waving his staff around like it was a flame-thrower.

One of the vamps moved forward and the mage unleashed a fireball at him. But instead of the pulsating ball of flaming plasma he was expecting, all he got was a smoky ball of sputtering, dull orange fire.

'Oh, crappola,' he muttered. 'This honcho is out of juice.'

Without further communication, Emily and Troy, Wolfman and Daywalker, leaped from the rooftop into the middle of the remaining vamps.

Troy roared as he sprang into action, grabbed one of the Grinders, picked him up above his head and smashed him into the last remain Grinder with enough force to actually blow both of them into pieces. Arms, legs, heads and sundry innards splattered across the cobblestones.

'Dude,' said the mage with an expression of awe. 'Totally gnarly.'

Emily conjured up Deathwalker and swung as she landed, decapitating two *Nosferatu* in one fell swoop.

The last two vampires didn't stand a chance. For they were not facing normal combatants. They were facing a pair of supernatural warriors at the very zenith of their power. The Omega and the Daywalker outclassed the average *Nosferatu* in every aspect. Speed, strength, agility, combat training and experience.

Three seconds after they had launched themselves off the roof, the rest of the vampires had met with the true death.

'Brah, that was epic. Like totally bitchin. Like, when the dudette chopped those smiley's heads off, man, macking stuff. And you, howling dude, wow, that's all, like … wow.'

The mage, a young human male stuck his hand out, a grin like a slice of watermelon etched across his face.

Troy took it and shook once. Carefully. His massive paw engulfing the human hand.

Emily followed.

'I'm, like, Shaun,' said the mage. 'Thanks, and respect, brah's, for like saving my butt there.'

'No problem,' said Emily. 'I'm…'

'Hey, I know who you are,' interjected Shaun. 'Omega-dude and Daywalker-dudette. Come on, you're like mega-famous.'

Emily smiled. Shaun's enthusiasm and energy were infectious.

'So, like what are we gonna do now?' he asked. 'Like, wale on some more smileys?'

Before either Troy or Emily could answer, the sound of Tag's voice echoed through the city. Followed by the unmistakable sound of missus Jones cutting loose.

'BUMF's,' he bellowed. 'Half a dozen of them. Big Ugly Moth…'

The rest of his sentence was drowned out as Troy pulsed a command to the Pack.

‘Pack. On Tag, now.’
Both he and Emily burst into a run.
Shaun followed; the huge grin still plastered across his face.

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CHAPTER 26

‘How many?’ growled Troy.

‘Maybe six,’ answered Tag. ‘Might be more, but I can’t see any.’

‘Why so few?’ mused Troy.

‘Overconfidence,’ ventured Emily. ‘Not sure how many BUMF’s they sent to *Pareen*, but they took the place with ease. I’m sure they expected no more resistance from *Romeen*. And don’t forget, every one of those monsters is worth at least twenty normal *Nosferatu*.’

‘Yeah, but now they got us,’ yelled Tag as he dragged a line of fire across the approaching Chernobyl Monsters, missus Jones spewing out super-heated silver slugs at a rate of one hundred a second. ‘Crap, missed again. Man, these uglies are fast.’

The rest of the Pack arrived and gathered around the Omega.

‘Six BUMF’s. Maybe fifty *Nosferatu* and a hundred Grinders. Oh, and a bunch of Familiars armed with assault rifles…’

Missus Jones roared again. ‘Less Familiars now,’ grunted Tag.

‘I want two teams to attack each BUMF,’ continued Troy. ‘Six wolves to each one. Muller, you guys deal with the Grinders and the Familiars. Emily and I will take on the rest of the *Nosferatu*. Pack!’

‘Pack!’

The hunters surged forward, meeting the charging BUMF’s, Grinders, *Nosferatu* and Familiars in the middle of the main street.

‘Hey, big brah,’ yelled Shaun to Tag. ‘Are you the, like, that Forever-dude I heard about?’

Tag turned to the young mage and grinned. ‘That’s me, surfer dude, the Immortal. Who you?’

‘Shaun. I’m like super-good with fire.’ To prove his statement, the fire-mage hurled a seething ball of white-hot plasma at the incoming Grinders. It exploded like a grenade, taking three or four of them out.

‘Welcome to Muller’s Marauders,’ said Tag. ‘Stick with me and we can do some serious damage together.’

Shaun grinned back and followed the big man into the battle.

***

Ursula led her five wolves into their first encounter with the BUMF’s. Eschewing the advice Emily had given her, the German Alpha decided to attack from both behind and from the front. It made sense to her, use the front attack to distract, and then capitalize on that distraction

by launching a surprise attack from the rear.

She sent her three strongest wolves to the front, while she led the rest in a flanking movement to get around the back of the chosen BUMF.

Jurgen, Thomas and Viktor charged head-on at the uber-vamp, using every ounce of speed they could. Jaws ready to tear and rend.

None of them made contact.

Viktor died first, his jaws torn apart with savage and brutal strength, tearing the top of his head off and bisecting his body from nose to front legs.

Before Thomas could react, the uber-vamp had him by the scruff of his neck. Then with barely a grunt of effort, the vamp punched through Thomas's neck, latched onto his spine, and tore it out like he was deboning a fish.

As he threw the wolven corpse to the cobbles, Jurgen managed to latch onto the vamp's face, his powerful jaws clamping shut like an oversized, steel bear trap.

But the BUMF merely ripped the wolf off his face like a Band-Aid, tearing most of his own nose off and slashing open his own cheek so deeply it exposed his teeth and fangs. With a screech of anger, he crushed Jurgen's head, squeezing so hard the wolf's eyes burst from their sockets, and his cranial matter erupted from his ears.

Such was the Chernobyl vampire's speed and strength, this all happened in under one single second.

Three werewolves. A combined age of over seven hundred years.

Gone.

Killed by the ultimate apex predator.

And then Ursula and her two wolves were on him.

Ursula tore out his left Achilles tendon, while Gunter ripped out the right.

Charlotte latched onto the back of the BUMF's neck, and after seeing how he had treated Jurgen, she bit quickly, tore out a chunk of flesh and disengaged.

Again, and again the wolves attacked, rushing in, delivering whatever damage they could, and backing straight out. All the time, wheeling, turning moving as fast as they ever had.

Once more, this savage dance of death took place at speeds approaching that of sound. A mere blur of movement, punctuated by arcing jets of blood, random scatterings of flesh, and accompanied with an overall sound of rage.

Three seconds later, Ursula ripped the BUMF's head from his shoulders.

Not even a Chernobyl vamp can reanimate after that.

Then the Alpha turned to look at her fallen family, and her howl of

utter grief filled the air.

***

Lorenzo followed Emily and Troy's instructions to the letter. He commanded three of his team of six to go full wolf, while he and the other two remained in human form, carrying two Spectre submachine guns each.

Avoiding taking the BUMF head on, Lorenzo sent his wolves on a long looping run to get behind their chosen vamp. Then he and the other human-form wolves flanked the uber-vamp and opened fire.

Bearing in mind what Emily had told him, Lorenzo instructed his men not to bother aiming for the BUMF. Rather, take a gamble and aim where you thought the creature would be in the next split second. This ploy, added to their ability to feel each other's feelings and interpret each other's thoughts, allowed them to lay down a storm of silver on each side of the vamp, almost guaranteeing it would move into one of their arcs of fire.

The Spectres purred as they spewed out a combined rate of over eighty-five rounds a second, filling the air with fire and silver. No matter how fast the BUMF moved, if he wanted to attack, it was inevitable he would get tagged by multiple rounds. And silver slugs hurt vampires. Even ones effected so by nuclear radiation.

The .45 rounds had been hand-loaded to turn the usually slow round, into a massive high-velocity monster. A round that one needed superhuman strength to control. And when it hit, it penetrated, no matter how tough the BUMF's skin was. This added to the fact that silver slows down the *Nosferatu* healing process, meant that the scores of rounds impacting were quickly becoming more than just a bother to the Chernobyl monster.

Try as he might, he could not come to grips with any of the human-wolves as they darted back and forth, hammering him with high-velocity silver in a constant stream.

Then the three flanking wolves hit.

With swift strikes they tore into the BUMF's hamstrings, calves and Achilles' tendons. Tearing, cutting and ripping. Then moving back at mega-speed.

The uber-vamp spun to face them, and for his sins, received about twenty silver rounds to the back of his head.

Chips of bone flew, blood arced and tumors burst as the slugs chewed into him. But he couldn't turn, because the wolves were growling and snapping at him, keeping his full attention.

That's when Lorenzo stepped in, placed his two guns against the BUMF's ears and fired.

A full once second burst, drilling over thirty rounds into the

Chernobyl vampire's brain.

The monster dropped and the wolves swarmed over him, tearing at his neck until they had removed his head completely.

As one they howled.

Victory.

***

Armand hit the wall with such force, he brought the side of the small cottage crashing down around him. He had attacked the BUMF from the rear as instructed, but held on too long, attempting to tear the monster's calf off his leg. And the thing was so unbelievably fast. He grabbed Armand by his neck and tossed him away like he was nothing. As opposed to a four-hundred-pound Alpha werewolf.

The French Alpha snarled as he felt his broken ribs grind together when they healed up. Blood poured from a deep cut above his eye and his front right leg was also broken.

But he knew he would be fine in less than a minute. And now was no time to nurse wounds. With a roar of anger, he charged back into the fray.

Two more wolves lay on the ground, Pierre, one of their youngest pack members and Brigitte, a feisty female wolf from the Ardennes region.

Brigitte was shaking her head in what looked like an attempt to regain her consciousness. Blood flowed freely from a cut in her left flank, but apart from that she seemed okay.

Pierre, however, would never regain anything. His body was almost torn in twain, his innards lay strewn across the cobbles, the whiteness of bones stuck out of his back and his open eyes were dull and lifeless.

Armand howled in rage and leaping high, he latched onto the back of the uber-vamp's head. With a savage twist, he sheared off the back of the vampire's skull, like chopping the top off a boiled egg.

As he fell backwards, another wolf jumped in and tore into the monster's exposed brain.

Seconds later the creature was down for good, the contents of its cranium scattered about on the cobbles.

***

Troy and Emily were once more doing the dance.

Wolfman and Daywalker.

The Fred and Ginger of the battlefield.

Deathwalker spun and glittered in the prismatic illuminations, a deadly steel-edged light show. And the Omega twisted and turned, rending and shredding and destroying.

The dismembered bodies of the *Nosferatu* piled up around the two

supernatural's. The cobbles glistened with blood and the air was full of the shrieking and screeching of vampires meeting the true death.

***

Missus Jones was pissed.

And she showed her displeasure by screaming out invective laden fire, and insults of silver. Scorching lines of red tracer burned its way through the packed Grinders, literally cutting them in half.

On either side of the big man, the Knights of the Holy See fired their automatic shotguns in bursts of three rounds, riddling the brain-burned vamps with hundreds of balls of silver coated lead.

Muller added to the destruction by hurling silver-nitrate grenades, courtesy of the Prof's inventiveness, into the mass of slavering, gibbering, dying sub-vampires.

And lastly, a massive grin etched into his face, stood Shaun, wielding balls of fire like it was a circus act. Albeit a deadly, death dealing one.

***

Ursula slowed down.

From her Pack link, she could tell three Chernobyl vamps were down.

That should have left three more.

But in front of her, standing in the middle of the town square, were another seven of them. And with them, at least another two score *Nosferatu*.

Monstrous, tumor ridden, terrifyingly powerful Uber-vampires.

One of them caught her eye and laughed, the sound a bass rumble of scorn.

'Hello, little doggie,' he said. 'Come to play, have we?'

For the first time ever, the German Alpha felt a shiver of fear run through her. And worse than that – doubt.

Then Tag appeared next to her, his smoking mini-gun held at port, ready to rock-and-roll. 'Hey, wolf-fraulein,' he greeted. 'Looks like you just found something … ugly.' The big man laughed. 'Hideous mother's, aren't they? What say we tear them some brand new assholes?'

Ursula growled, then she realized she was no longer afraid, so her growl morphed into a shuddering lupine chuckle. She looked up at the big man and nodded.

As she did, she saw the rest of the pack arriving, including the Omega and the Daywalker. But she also sensed, through her pack mind, the loss of many of them. She could not tell exactly who, but it was obvious they had already lost maybe five or six of their brothers

and sisters.

The Italian pack, in human form, stood next to the Knights, their submachineguns ready to add firepower to the auto-shotguns and missus Jones.

Shaun filled his hands with fire, and Troy and Emily took up the right flank, the rest of the pack around them.

Both sides stared at each other for almost twenty seconds.

No one moved.

Then Tag yelled out. 'Say hello to my little friend.'

Missus Jones opened fire, closely followed by the thunderous accompaniment of half a dozen auto-shotguns and a score of submachine guns and pistols.

The Chernobyl vamps and their brethren blurred into movement, some moving to the flanks, others charging straight at the hunters.

At the same time, the wolves surged forward to meet them. In the few seconds it took for the vampires to engage, over six hundred rounds of ammunition and two massive fireballs ripped into their ranks. Even some of the Chernobyl monsters were struck many times, such was the vast quantity of metal in the air.

But, although the storm of silver managed to take down a couple of the *Nosferatu*, it did little more than slow the Chernobyl vamps down slightly.

And then the battle truly began.

The German pack peeled off to the right flank, and attacked the dozen or so *Nosferatu* that were arrayed there.

The Knight's took the left flank to prevent them from encircling the hunters.

And Emily and Troy met the BUMF's head on, doing all they could to draw them into a situation where their backs would be exposed to the rest of the Pack.

But they were facing an enemy far more powerful than any they had faced before. Each Chernobyl monster was stronger and faster than any single hunter, bar Emily or Troy.

And it showed.

The Knights, together with Tag and Shaun made relatively short work of their *Nosferatu*, tearing them apart in a tornado of fire and silver.

On the other flank, Ursula was keeping her wolves as tight as possible, driving the *Nosferatu* back, hamstringing them and then, as they went down, tearing their throats out.

As soon as the last one was dispatched, she joined the rest of the hunters to combat the Chernobyl monsters.

Emily and Troy had already destroyed one, but they had paid a heavy price. Both were bleeding from a multitude of wounds and were

visibly tiring.

The remaining six BUMF's were like a an unstoppable wave of destruction. Already, three more wolves lay broken, dead or dying. One of the Knights was gone, his body torn to shreds by the horrendous strength and savagery of the uber-vamps.

Missus Jones was out of ammo, and Tag had decided to get up close and personal to one of the BUMF's. The one-sided fight lasted for less than two seconds as the big man was sent crashing through the wall of a nearby house, almost every bone in his body shattering as he did so.

Shaun threw a fireball at one of the monsters, then turned and ran. 'Sorry, dudes,' he yelled as he practiced a strategic withdrawal. 'I'm all outa magic. Gonna have to sit the rest of this one out.'

Muller pulled his Knights back, giving way step by step as they fired and fired until their weapons were sizzling hot. But the silver laced lead seemed to do little more than inconvenience the BUMF's, striking and drawing blood, but hardly even slowing them down.

And then the entire underground city reverberated to the sound of fury. A thunderous crash that shivered the very earth itself, such was its volume.

Emily glanced up to see Merlin standing on the flat roof of one of the houses next to the square. Bolts of lightning flashed and coruscated about him. Crackling and snapping as they jumped from his widespread arms to the thousands of crystalline stalactites that covered the hidden cities ceiling. The air stank of ozone and tin, and the wolves' fur stood on end as the atmosphere became supercharged with electricity.

And then, with a sound like a hundred avalanches, thousands of stalactites cracked free from the ceiling and whipped downwards, propelled by the vibrating storm of lightning. Every Chernobyl monster was struck by hundreds of the electrically charged crystals. And as they struck, they exploded with great force.

The collateral damage was huge as almost every hunter was also struck by splintered shards of rock. Every window in the city imploded, doors were torn from their hinges, and roof tiles were scatted like confetti as the power rolled across the city.

But in one fell stroke, every BUMF was shown the true death.

And then slowly, like a fallen oak, the wizard collapsed, falling from the roof to strike the pebbles two stories below.

Emily sprinted over to him, placing her hand against his throat to check for a pulse.

But there was nothing.

No heartbeat.

No sign of breathing.

Simply a broken, clammy body.

The Prof appeared beside her, as if he had just teleported there. Perhaps he had.

Emily looked at him, her eyes full of tears.

'He's gone,' she whispered.

The Prof knelt down and placed his hand on Merlin's neck.

'I've already…', began Emily.

But the Prof held his other hand up to forestall her. 'Quiet,' he snapped.

The rest of the hunters gathered around. Silent. Unbelieving that Merlin had fallen.

After a full two minutes, the Prof smiled. 'He's alive,' he stated.

Emily leaned forward to check again. 'I can't feel anything,' she said.

'You haven't waited long enough,' said the Prof. 'His heart is barely beating. Perhaps once every couple of minutes. And his breathing is so shallow as to be almost undetectable. But he is alive. That spell took so much of his life force he has scarcely enough left to sustain himself. Come, help me carry him to a bed. I need to replenish his life force. Where is Tag?'

The big man limped up, his shirt hanging in tatters from his blood drenched body. 'I's here, Prof,' he grunted.

'Good, I will need to drain some of your life force to give to Merlin. It is not going to be pleasant, but you're are the only immortal amongst us.'

Tag nodded. 'Whatever it takes, Prof. I'm in.'

'Follow me,' commanded the Prof.

The big man picked up Merlin's comatose body and followed the Prof. As did Emily.

Under Troy's supervision, the rest of the hunters split into teams to see what help they could offer the residents of the devastated city.

The battle for *Romeen* was done.

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CHAPTER 27

‘He’s been around for a very long time,’ said the Prof. ‘I’m not even sure if he can die. Well, not in the traditional sense.’

‘So, he’s fully recovered?’ asked Emily.

The Prof shook his head. ‘He’s out of the woods, but that attack spell took a tremendous amount of energy. I wouldn’t look to him doing anything more magical than lighting his pipe for the foreseeable future.’

Tag walked in and nodded a greeting. Shaun followed close behind.

‘Hey, big man,’ said Troy. ‘You look like crap.’

‘Are you okay?’ asked Emily, her concern obvious.

Tag nodded. ‘Yeah, sorta. Turns out, having your life force drained and giving it to someone else sucks ass. It feels a bit like someone levering your brain out and stomping on it. Over and over and over. Plus, I lost another shirt. Also, there’s no tea in this stupid city.’

Emily walked up to the big man and gave him a hug.

‘Ain’t no problem, girly,’ he said with a grin. ‘Tag be strong, don’t worry none about me. So, the wizard gonna be good?’

Emily nodded. ‘He’ll live, but he’s going to be weak for a while.’

‘Hey, dudette,’ said Shaun by way of greeting. ‘Wolf dude.’ He looked at the Prof. ‘Old dude. How’s it hanging?’

The Prof frowned. ‘Pray tell, who is this?’

‘Hey, bruh,’ said the fire mage, holding his hand out. ‘I’m Shaun. Like, I burn stuff.’

The Prof stared at the young man, shook his head and walked off.

‘Oh, wow. Did I like, offend?’ asked Shaun of no one in particular.

‘Not really,’ said Emily. ‘He’s worried about Merlin.’

Shaun stared at Emily, his face blank. Finally, he spoke. ‘Like, yeah, sure, dudette. Merlin?’

Emily nodded.

‘Is that who threw the huge one down on those Big Ugly Mother F…’

‘BUMF’s’ laughed Tag. ‘He gets it.’

‘Yep, that’s him,’ confirmed Emily.

Shaun took an unsteady step backwards and looked like he was going to pass out. ‘Merlin,’ he mumbled.

‘You okay, surfer dude?’ asked Tag.

‘Yes. No. Maybe. Merlin.’

‘Not making a lot of sense, Shaun,’ noted Tag.

‘I think he’s a bit starstruck,’ said Emily.

‘Well, like, yeah,’ admitted Shaun. ‘Merlin is like the honcho-of-honchos when it comes to chucking spells.’

‘The Prof’s not too shabby either,’ said Emily.

Shaun stared at her, then shook his head. ‘The Professor? You know him?’

‘Sure, he’s the old dude.’

Shaun blanched. ‘Oh no. I like insulted the Professor. He’s a legend. Like, mondo big deal. Man, I feel like really overawed right now. I think I’ll just lie down a bit.’

With that, the young fire mage lay down where he was and assumed the fetal position.

Tag raised an eyebrow. ‘That is one weird dude.’

Before Emily could respond, the door to the house swung open and a city delegation entered. A dwarf, a human, and a male and female *Hulder*.

Coincidently, Merlin and the Prof also entered from the interior of the house.

The female *Hulder* stepped forward, her expression imperious. Haughty.

‘I am glad to see you are all well,’ she started. ‘And you will be pleased to know, the city elders have decided not to press charges against you for violating the age-old ban on bringing werewolves in the hidden cities.’

There was a pause as the hunters stared open-mouthed at the arrogant *Hulder*.

‘Well, that is good to know,’ responded Tag. ‘And I’m sure you’ll be pleased to know; missus Jones and I have decided not whip your collective asses for being such a bunch of douche-bags. Although, I will be charging you all for a new shirt.’

‘Now just a minute,’ snapped the human elder.

‘No, you just a minute,’ returned Tag. ‘I am sick and tired of laying my body, and my shirts on the line for your fairy asses. If it’s not in the Winter Fae kingdom, it’s in some hidden city, or on some icy-cold mountain top. And you egotistical Fae-types never say thank you. You never show any humility, and I am now officially pissed at you all. It’s our job to off bloodsuckers, not protect the fairies.’

‘Well, we seem to have provided you with an opportunity to do that,’ smirked the male Hulder.

Tag took a step forward and popped the elder in the mouth. A short right jab, thrown just hard enough to loosen a few teeth and knock him on his rear. ‘And I don’t need no lip from you, asswipe,’ snapped the big man.

‘Right, that’s enough,’ stated Merlin as he stepped forward. ‘Look,

Tag is correct. Your overweening self-righteous attitude is sickening. Many of those werewolves you are being so snotty about, sacrificed their lives to protect a community that spurned them. Quite frankly, you disgust me.'

The dwarf stepped forward and bowed low. 'Forgive us, ancient one,' he said. 'On behalf of the citizens of *Romeen* who are…' he paused and glanced at the three elders with an undisguised expression of disdain. 'Well, let's just say, who are not these so-called representatives.'

The male Hulder looked like he was about to say something, but Tag glanced at him and he closed his mouth with an audible snap.

'We would like to offer our most sincere thanks. Without you, and your hunters, and your wolves, I fear *Romeen* would have gone the way of *Pareen*, and even now we would be living under vampiric subjugation. It is obvious we need to take a look at some of our more outdated policies. I assure you; we will be doing so *post haste*.'

Merlin nodded his acceptance of the dwarf's statement. 'Thank you, master?'

'Oldem Rocksmiter.'

'Master, Rocksmiter. But I must point out, they are not my wolves. They are part of the Omega's pack.' He gestured towards Troy.

The dwarf bowed again. 'Omega.'

'Master, Rocksmiter,' greeted Troy. 'Asswipes,' he nodded to the three elders.

Tag chuckled.

'Well, looks like our work here is done,' said Merlin. 'And we shall take our leave.'

'Umm, can I come with?' asked Shaun from his still prostrate position.

Merlin looked down at him. 'Who are you?'

'He burns stuff,' explained Tag. 'And talks in surfer-dude language.'

Merlin raised an eyebrow, once again floored by one of Tag's classic non-answers.

'He's a friend,' added Emily.

'Then he's welcome,' replied Merlin. 'Now come along, let us away.'

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CHAPTER 28

Belikov considered *Pareen* to be his new official residence.

As such, he moved there with his complete entourage including both Jebe and Hadad.

They stood to one side as the Blood King expressed his disappointment at the loses the *Nosferatu* had experienced in the attempt to take *Romeen*.

The fact that none of the brethren present had actually been involved in the abortive attack meant little to the *Krov Tsar*. And his displeasure was both swift and deadly.

Already, six dismembered corpses lay scattered about him.

And none of the brethren were voicing their anger at what was quite obviously an unjust punishment. Quite the opposite, in fact. The *Triginta* had now imbued Belikov with an almost god-like level of charisma, and it was effecting his followers on a visceral level. Instead of righteous anger at his unfair behavior, they wept tears of distress because they had let him down, rending their hair and beating their breasts in paroxysms of grief.

Even Jebe shook with emotion as he lamented his unacceptable performance.

Only Hadad managed to remain, if not wholly impervious to the Blood King's charisma, at least a little inured to it. And that was only because he had in his possession the final piece of the cursed artifact. That, combined with his natural high level of intelligence and natural acumen, kept him from becoming a mere vassal to the Blood King's whims.

Finally, Belikov's temper driven tantrum ground to a halt, and he dismissed all except for Jebe and Hadad. Calling the two over, he commanded them to leave forthwith and journey with all haste to Berlin to make contact with the German houses of the *Nosferatu*.

'We need more troops,' he stated. 'Recruit the Germans and then we will use our combined forces to crush these hunters.'

Both elders bowed deeply and stepped back. However, as they were about to leave, Belikov called Hadad back, dismissing Jebe with a gesture.

As soon as his second had left the room, Belikov addressed Hadad, his voice a mere hoarse whisper, eyes darting around the room in a dance of visual paranoia.

'I begin to doubt Jebe's loyalty,' he muttered, white specks of spittle

foaming from the corners of his mouth. ‘The failure at *Romeen*, I suspect it was his doing. He grows jealous of me.’

Hadad remained silent. He knew that any utterance would be taken the wrong way. Even one of agreement.

Belikov giggled. ‘I know,’ he whispered. ‘I can see his mind. His desire to usurp me. The *Krov Tsar*. The god-king. Come, come,’ he grabbed Hadad by the arm and pulled him close.

‘Scholar, you are my right hand now. Do not let me down. Leave, but keep a close eye on the traitor.’

Then he smiled and Hadad was hit with the full force of his *Triginta* enhanced charismatic power.

It took all of his strength not to blurt out the fact he was in possession of the last silver sestertius that would complete the full *Triginta*.

Taking a deep breath, he bowed and left the room, fully aware of how close he had come to the true death.

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CHAPTER 29

The Pack lost nine members on that bloody night in *Romeen*.

Two females and seven males.

Four Germans.

Three Italians

Two Frenchmen.

To live is to suffer. To suffer is to live.

As was the Pack tradition. There was no funeral, no remembrance service and no memorial.

The bodies were taken out into the woods and buried deep.

Then the Pack ran together for the rest of the day, expressing their grief. Honoring the fallen with howls that sounded out for miles, driving the residents of the surrounding villages inside, clutching their crucifixes and silver jewelry. For this was a part of Croatia where the people still believed in the old tales.

Then – it was done. The grieving had been given its moment, and it now had no more hold over the survivors.

Pack.

But deep down inside him, Troy felt like something had broken. Something irreplaceable had been taken from him. However, as Omega, he could show no weakness. No pain.

The Pack's feeling were his feelings. If he was weak, they were weak.

So, he pushed the feelings of loss and bereavement and self-blame aside.

Later that day, the Pack returned to Merlin's hideaway, and Troy sat in the kitchen together with his Alphas, Tag, Merlin, Emily, the Prof, Muller and Shaun. In front of him, a mug of Tag's magic tea.

As he sipped at the tea, Troy could feel all of the Alphas' thoughts.

They were in a mild state of shock. He knew they had never really believed Emily when she warned them of the Chernobyl vampires' strength and power. And now that they had faced the reality, they had come to realize, for the first time in their long lives, they may not be the top of the food chain.

'You did well,' said Merlin, addressing all present. 'The free world owes you a debt that not only will it never repay, it will never even know it. But that is our lot,' he continued. 'We are here to fight the ultimate evil, to pay the ultimate price. Because we are hunters, and naught but us can do what we do. Although the road is long and hard,

we are harder. We will overcome, because we have to. Thank you all.'

Ursula sniffed and rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand.

In any normal group of people, someone may have offered her some form of comfort, or consolation. She had lost friends, and more. And, as Alpha, every death in her pack was considered to be her direct responsibility, such was the weight of the Alpha's mantle.

But as an Alpha, she had to be stronger. Her emotions were not hers alone. They were shared by her pack members.

So, instead of offering solace and support, Troy growled at her. 'Strength, Alpha,' he commanded. 'The time for grieving has passed. Enough.'

Ursula sat straighter and nodded, trying her hardest to ignore the shame and embarrassment she felt at showing such a crass slip.

'I think we should look for help,' offered the Prof. 'We managed to bring the true death to ten Chernobyl monsters, but I have it on good authority that there are still close to three score and ten left. Plus, the usual houses of the *Nosferatu*, countless Grinders, and many hundreds of familiars. Personally, I don't fancy those odds.'

Merlin shrugged. 'Perhaps. But who?'

'The Fae?' questioned the Prof. 'After all, they do owe us.'

'Yeah, big time,' exclaimed Tag. 'But they is useless. What help can they be?'

Merlin chuckled. 'You will find that in this realm they are quite formidable. Not their common foot soldiers perhaps, but their mages most definitely pack a punch. The earth is full of untapped magical power. And there is so little of it used. So, a few Fae battle mages would be a huge help. However, I doubt Felicia would agree.'

Troy frowned in thought.

'What?' asked Emily.

The Omega smiled. 'There are rumors of a huge clan of shifters in Russia.'

'Wolves?' asked Emily. 'But why did they not come when you called?'

'No, not wolves,' interjected Merlin. 'Troy is talking about clan Medvedi. Bears. Ursine shifters. I have come across them once before. Long, long ago. When we still used to call the area, *Russkaya Zemlya*. The land of the Rus.'

'Those are the ones,' concurred Troy. 'I don't know much about them, though. Are they committed to fighting the vamps?'

Merlin shrugged. 'Honestly, I don't think so. The lore never put that burden on them specifically. It has always been our cross to bear. The Pack and the Shadowhunters. The bears live in Siberia. An area designated as a natural reserve. Putorana State National Reserve. A zone that it is strictly forbidden to enter. They have long since had an

agreement with whoever rules Russia. They keep to themselves, and in return they don't kill anyone. Unless they get pissed about something.'

'Like?' asked Tag.

'Oil pipelines, deforestation. Hunting on their land.'

Tag chuckled. 'Sorta like Greenpeace with fur and teeth. Cool.'

'Like, mondo enviro-grizzlies,' added Shaun.

'They would be superlative allies,' continued Merlin. 'They are highly respected and woe betide any who cross them. Not only would they declare war, so would the powers that be in Russia. They would be a huge advantage to our cause, but I hold little faith. Even if we could find them. They are extremely xenophobic and prefer to keep very much to themselves.'

'We have to try,' said Troy. 'If we go up against the BUMF's like we are now, they will defeat us. Kill us all.'

Merlin nodded his agreement. 'Fine, I will ask Latobias to take a small group of us to Putoran. Troy, you stay here with the Pack. I will go with Emily, Tag and the Professor.'

Troy did a visible double take. 'You want to take Tag on what is basically a diplomatic mission? Are you sure?' He turned to Tag. 'No offence, buddy.'

'Some taken,' quipped the big man.

Merlin smiled. 'Yes, Tag has a certain type of diplomacy that may well be needed on this trip.'

'Yeah,' responded Tag. 'That's why my middle name is Diplomacy. Actually, it's Dajuan. But that be close enough.'

'Come on then, get ready,' said Merlin. 'Let's see what we can do.'

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CHAPTER 30

‘We shall take Berlin,’ stated Belikov.

‘But my king, there is no hidden city beneath Berlin,’ said Jebe hesitantly.

‘I said nothing about any hidden city. I mean Berlin itself. I have always had an abiding hatred for the so-called Master Race.’

Hadad did his best to hide a smirk. The Blood King was losing his mind in every way.

‘What do you think, Arab?’

Hadad shrugged. ‘Whatever. Why not?’

‘Exactly. Jebe, what do you need?’

‘Familiars,’ replied Jebe. ‘An army of them. We will need someone to fight in the daylight. Obviously, now we have convinced the German houses to come over to our side, we will own the night.’

‘Do you not think the German houses may take umbrage to us attacking their city?’ asked Hadad, keeping his voice low and respectful so as not to enrage the mad king.

‘Once I speak directly to them, they will welcome whatever I suggest,’ snapped Belikov.

Hadad nodded. For the statement was true. None, well almost none, could stand against the *Krov Tsar’s* newly enhanced charismatic powers.

‘And after Berlin,’ continued Belikov. ‘We take Moscow. Actually, maybe even at the same time.’

‘My king,’ said Jebe. ‘I would advise against starting a war on two fronts. Particularly if one of them is Russia.’

Belikov scoffed. ‘Jebe, where is your faith? Your pride? We are the peak of evolution. The humans are nothing. As insects to us. If we want, we take. It is as simple as that.’ The Blood King stared at his long-time friend and second. ‘Are you with me, or against me, Jebe?’

‘With you, always, my king.’

Belikov giggled and then stood up and, without preamble, left the room at a run.

Hadad shook his head. They were idiots all of them. But mostly the mad king.

Jebe watched him leave and then turned to see Hadad openly sneering at the retreating monarch. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Don’t. Seriously, Hadad, I am not in the mood. He is our king and we shall obey his commands.’

Hadad shrugged. ‘Actually, Jebe, I have little to say. But you do realize we cannot declare war on Germany. And NATO. And that will most likely draw America into it.’

‘I know. I am not grotesquely stupid,’ sighed the number two. ‘It is just, when he is in front of me, anything seems possible.’

‘That is the power of the *Triginta*.’

‘I know. But even now, the thought of letting him down fills me with great sadness. I must do as he tells me, whatever the risk.’

‘Well, we do not have to attack Berlin in the conventional sense,’ said Hadad.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, you said we own the night. You were incorrect; we do not own Berlin’s night. Not yet. Let us start there. We will set up a new house in Berlin, and from there we will stalk the streets, take over the entertainment, theaters, restaurants, prostitution, gambling. Ensure people are terrified to go out after dark without our permission. Then when we well truly control Berlin at night, we will up the ante.

‘After that, the politicians, the police the army. That way, slowly, we shall begin to control the day. That is how I would do it.’

‘Hadad, you are a genius.’

‘I know.’

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CHAPTER 31

‘More snow,’ grumbled Tag. ‘Always bloody snow. I’s sick of it.’

Merlin, Tag, Emily and the Prof stood in the swirl kicked up by Latobias’ helicopter as it thundered skywards, leaving the team standing in a clearing next to the woods in the middle of Siberia.

‘Where to now?’ asked Emily. ‘We saw no sign of them from the air.’

‘Oh, they’re here,’ said the Prof. ‘All we need to do is wait.’

‘Can’t smell anything,’ noted Emily. ‘But then again, the freezing temperature, the wind, it’s not conducive to scent.’

‘Shoulda bought Shaun along,’ mumbled Tag. ‘He could have started a big ball of fire to keep us warm. And then maybe shot another ball into the sky to attract the eco-bears attention.’

Merlin chuckled. ‘Actually, that’s not a bad idea.’ With a sharp gesture, the wizard conjured up a sparkling red ball of fire, then with another, he flicked it skywards. It rocketed upwards, hissing and crackling like a firework. At a couple of hundred feet, it simply hung there, like a miniature supernova.

‘Cool,’ said Tag. ‘Now can you make a big one to keep us warm?’

Merlin raised an eyebrow. ‘I’m a wizard,’ he replied. ‘Not a domestic heating appliance. Come on, lets head for the woods, get some protection from this infernal wind.’

Ten minutes later, they stood huddled together under a massive pine tree.

Emily cocked her head to one side and sniffed the air, letting the wolf out. ‘They’re here,’ she said quietly. ‘Not close, maybe a mile away. A few of them.’

‘Okay,’ said Merlin. ‘I’ll do the talking. Remember, Tag, diplomacy.’

‘Yeah, sure. Whatever,’ replied the big man.

The bears appeared through the trees. Four of them.

And they were massive.

They stopped in front of the team, and the foremost one stood up, looming over them, perhaps eleven feet tall and weighing in at over two thousand pounds. He opened his massive maw and roared. The snow drifted off the trees and the earth shook with the amplitude. Behind him, the three other bears joined in, huffing and grunting as they stood tall.

The team stood still.

Finally, Merlin spoke. ‘I am Myrddin Merlin Wyllt. I am a friend of clan Medvedi, named so by one, Boris Volkov, also known as The

Plunderer. I need to caucus with your clan Alpha.'

The bear huffed and then answered, its voice a low rumble, like a steel drum full of rocks being rolled down a mountain. 'You tell untruth. The Plunderer passed to next plain some six hundred years ago. He myth and legend.'

'As you can see,' said Merlin, gesturing towards himself. 'Being myth and legend does not necessarily mean the object of such mystification is dead and gone. Now, take us to your Alpha, and if you ever call me an untruth teller again, your life will be forfeit.'

And with that utterance, Merlin allowed a brief surge of his power to be known. The air about him rippled with electricity, the trees shivered as their roots perceived the presence of his power, and the clouds above rumbled with thunder as the sky darkened ominously.

The bears chuffed and snorted, cowering slightly as the air around them seemed to thicken.

'Apologize, I do,' rumbled the lead bear in a thick Russian accent. 'Truly, you are being of great power. Follow us.'

The bears took off at such speed it was obvious they were testing the team. But the hunters kept up with ease. Even the Prof, who seemed to glide over the snow like he was skiing.

After half an hour or so, the bears increased their speed, driving through the thick snow with great, puffing bounds.

Still, the hunters kept up.

Mere minutes later, they slowed to a normal, loping run. Obviously, the test was over.

The hunters followed until they got to a clearing deep in the forest. Before them lay a village straight out of a medieval ren-faire re-enactment. But with bears.

Equal quantities of bears and humans walked the streets. A market square bustled with trade, and smoke rose up from the many chimneys. The bears in human form wore sturdy cotton and leather clothing. Some carried bags, others buckets, crates of foodstuffs or firewood.

The men were all incredibly hirsute, beards, long hair and furred forearms. The women wore their locks long, some tied back, others letting it blow free.

Children played together on the snow-covered green, again, some in human form, others as cubs.

On the far side of the market square, a trio of musicians sporting a lute, a tabor drum and a pipe, played jaunty, medieval sounding tunes.

The villagers stared openly at the hunters and their escort, with expressions of curiosity rather than aggression.

The escort led the team to the largest house in the village and

stopped outside.

'Wait,' instructed the leader. Then he morphed into human form, knocked on the door and let himself in.

'Man,' said Tag. 'That guy don't ever need to spend money on a fur coat, even when he's butt-naked. Must be the hairiest dude I ever did see.'

Emily suppressed a giggle.

Merlin raised an eyebrow. 'Diplomacy,' he muttered to Tag.

The big man nodded. 'Sure. But the truth is the truth. That is one hair-y bear-y scar-y dude.'

The door opened and the naked were-bear beckoned to the team to enter.

'Dude don't talk much neither,' noted Tag.

The were-bear glared at the big man as he stood aside to let them in, closing the door when they were inside.

They found themselves in a large, open room. In the center, a huge fire burned, the smoke drifting upwards through a copper cowl and chimney above it. Large wooden armchairs were scattered in groups about the room, as were various tables.

Standing next to the fire was a man. And even though he was in human form, he was still humangous.

He turned to face the team; his green eyes glimmered from beneath a pair of massive eyebrows. The rest of his face covered by a luxuriant beard and moustache.

'Greetings,' he said. His voice a surprisingly light, pleasant tenor. 'My Beta tells me you claim to be, Merlin.'

'I do not claim to be,' replied Merlin. 'I am.'

The were-bear Alpha nodded. 'So you say. Kirill says you have power, but mere power does not mean truth.'

Merlin shrugged. 'Believe, don't believe, it has little bearing on why we are here.'

Tag chuckled. 'Bear-ing.'

Kirill, the Beta, stared daggers at him.

The Alpha waved him away. 'Kirill, go. Clothe yourself, then return. Also, tell Arina to organize victuals and drinks for our guests.'

Kirill bowed and left.

'Sit,' grunted the Alpha, gesturing towards the chairs. 'My name is Ivan Nesti. Alpha of the Siberian sleuth.'

Merlin introduced the team. 'The Professor, Emily Hawk Shadowhunter and Daywalker, and Tag the immortal.'

Ivan chuckled. 'So, I find myself sitting amongst legends, if what you say is true.'

Before any of the hunters could respond, Kirill returned, followed by two blonde females. The girls carried large trays, laden with food and

drink.

They carried them to one of the tables and laid the feast out.

Jugs of beer, bottles of vodka, and many bowls of various pickled vegetables, smoked meats, cured fish and black bread.

‘Please, help yourself,’ said Ivan.

Tag needed no encouragement and piled his plate high with smoked meats and bread.

Merlin eschewed the offer of food, instead choosing to tell Ivan the story of the Chernobyl vampires.

Both Ivan and Kirill listened without asking questions, nodding occasionally. When Merlin finished the tale, he concluded by asking for Ivan’s help.

But before his request was complete, the ursine shifter started shaking his head.

‘I am sorry, wizard,’ he said. ‘It is not our custom to get involved in other-worldly affairs. Our place is here, in the steppes. We will protect what we have, but we see no reason to entangle ourselves in outsider’s conflicts.’

‘Yeah, cool,’ said Tag. ‘Well, when those BUMF’s is finished with the rest of humanity, they’se gonna come for you.’

Kirill smirked. ‘And then, we will kill them.’

‘You think,’ scoffed the big man. ‘I can’t kill one by myself, and trust me, I could wipe the floor with you, Winnie the Pooh.’

Kirill stood up and roared his disapproval of Tag’s comment. ‘You would challenge me?’

Tag frowned. ‘Actually, I didn’t challenge you, but if you gonna keep yelling and ruining my meal, maybe I outa.’

‘I accept,’ said Kirill. ‘Outside, now.’

‘Man, this dude has a seriously well-balanced personality,’ quipped Tag. ‘Like, with a chip on each shoulder. Okay, let’s do this, Pooh Bear.’

‘Wait,’ commanded Ivan. ‘You cannot fight in your ursine form,’ he commanded Kirill. ‘It would violate our lore, as well you know.’

Kirill sneered. ‘I not need to shift to beat this weak, mannerless human. Look him, is hardly larger than child.’

Tag frowned. It wasn’t often he was referred to as child-sized, what with standing six-six in socks and weighing in at over three hundred pounds.

But compared to Kirill, who topped him by six inches and outweighed him by at least sixty pounds, he supposed he did look rather feeble.

Emily glanced at Merlin, expecting the wizard to put a stop to the procedure, but when she caught his eye, he merely grinned and shook his head.

As they all headed to the door, Tag sang a tune to himself.

'Picnic time for teddy bears
'The little teddy bears are having a lovely time today.
'Today's the day the teddy bears have their picnic.'

The Prof stifled a chuckle and Emily rolled her eyes.

The group headed towards the village green, and as they did so, more were-bears gathered around, some in human form, others in full-bear mode.

The hubbub of conversation rippled through the village. Emily could hear the bulk of it was on the same theme. Id Est – *Kirill is about to kick some little human's ass. Everybody come and watch.*

The two combatants strode to the middle of the green and the rest of the village formed a ring around them.

'I hope you is gonna keep your pants on,' said Tag. 'I mean, I know Pooh bear goes full commando, but there's such a thing as taking it too far, even if he is your hero.'

'I teach you some respect, human,' growled Kirill.

'Combatants, ready?' asked Ivan.

Both nodded.

'Fine, as according to the lore, this fight is not to the death, it will continue until one or other cries, enough. So be it. Begin.'

Kirill attacked instantly, using his speed to cover the distance between them in a mere micro-second.

Only to find Tag had already shifted some six feet to the right.

'Gonna have to move faster than that, Pooh,' quipped the big man. Then he did the Ali-shuffle, dancing back and forth in the compacted snow.

Kirill charged again, trusting in his speed and strength to bring the bout to an early conclusion.

But, once again Tag skipped out of the way. This time, however, he unloaded a vicious right-hand haymaker that struck Kirill in the back of the head with enough force to knock down a stone wall.

'And that's all she wrote,' said Tag. 'Goodnight, sweet bear.'

But instead of falling to the floor like Tag expected, Kirill merely shook his head and then laughed. 'Seriously, human. Is that best you have? My mother hit harder than that. Really, is big joke.'

Tag stared at his fist, like it had somehow let him down. Then he shrugged. 'Well, that hasn't happened before. Looks like I'm gonna have to try harder.'

'*Da*,' agreed Kirill. 'Much, much harder.' He lunged at Tag and this time the big man opted to take him head on.

The two came together like a pair of runaway locomotives, slamming into each other with such force the very earth itself

shuddered with the impact.

And then the both of them decided to simply stand toe-to-toe and slug it out. Huge, unwieldy blows, each one telegraphed ahead. Easy to dodge, but both men eschewed any opportunity to duck and dive.

Instead, they just banged away at each other like rutting stags. Lips split, cheekbones cracked, teeth flew and bones broke.

But were-bears heal fast, and Tag healed even faster.

Kirill shaded Tag in terms of pure strength, but the big man was faster.

The were-bear was doing more damage, but Tag healed at a faster rate, and he was also getting his licks in.

After twenty minutes, it was obvious there was nothing between the two of them.

After forty, it had become a war of attrition.

And at the stroke of the hour, both combatants were leaning against each other for support, each taking turns to swing an increasingly weak blow.

'You learn manners yet?' gasped Kirill.

'Don't know,' grunted Tag. 'You managed to develop a sense of humor yet.'

Kirill staggered backwards, a look of incredulity on his face. 'What mean? I am very funny man. Whole village know of Kirill's sense of humor.'

'Crap,' snorted Tag. 'Why didn't you laugh at any of my Pooh jokes then?'

Kirill frowned. 'Not know that was humor. You not very funny man, maybe after this we have vodka and Kirill teach you how to tell jokes.'

Tag shrugged painfully. 'Maybe.' And he unleashed an overhand right that landed on Kirill's left temple and sent him crashing to his knees.

Then Tag stepped forward and cocked his fist once more.

Kirill flinched as he tensed for the next big hit.

But instead, Tag unclenched his fist and held his hand out for were-bear to grasp.

'Come on, bear-dude,' said the big man. 'Let's go drink some vodka and eat some meat. This is getting boring, not to mention painful.'

The Russian were-bear stared at Tag's proffered hand for a few seconds, then he grasped it and allowed the big man to haul him to his feet.

They looked each other in the eye for a while, and then both threw their arms around each other.

'You good man,' shouted Kirill as he hugged the big man.

'Ooh,' gasped Tag. 'A real bear-hug.'

Kirill laughed. 'Yes, ha, the hug of bear. Perhaps you can be funny.

Not complete lost cause after all. Let us see how we can help you.'

And Merlin looked over at Emily, catching her eye. 'Diplomacy,' he said with a grin as the village cheered the two combatants and followed them to the village hall to get into some serious partying.

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CHAPTER 32

It would not be an exaggeration to say the Russians now considered Tag to be an honorary were-bear.

His battle with Kirill was the exact type of thing that impressed them. Albeit that Tag freely admitted, in his own words - *if Kirill had been in his bear form, he would have kicked his Jamaican ass.*

And as it turned out, it seemed that Tag and the bears really did share the same sense of humor.

So much so that Ivan, their Alpha, officially welcomed the big man to the clan. Then he proceeded to inform Merlin, as Tag was now clan, he would send ten of his best warriors, including Kirill, back with the team to work alongside them.

Latobias picked them up the next day, and ten minutes later they were back at Merlin's.

The wizard was currently introducing the bears to the Pack.

The two types of shifters greeted each other politely, albeit coolly. There was no animosity, it was simply the fact that two powerful, highly territorial groups that had never mixed before, would be certain to experience at least some friction.

Troy didn't try to iron over the wrinkles, as he knew that over time it would get better.

A room full of apex predators shouldn't be expected to instantly hit it off, like some sort of inter-office party.

Almost immediately after the introductions were complete, Kirill asked if they could set up a den in the forest alongside the house.

Merlin offered them use of the barn, or even rooms in the house if they wanted, but Kirill assured him they preferred to sleep outdoors, as they spend most of their time in bear form.

As they left, the Prof approached Merlin. 'I cannot contact Belenas or Sirona,' he informed the wizard. 'I have been attempting to find out how their search for the *Triginta* is going.'

Merlin muttered a curse under his breath. 'Idiots,' he said. 'As I always said, a capricious lot, the gods. Selfish, childish and too powerful for their own good. So, now we have Grannus fancying himself as some sort of Californian cult leader, and Belenas and Sirona have gone AWOL. Most likely got bored searching for the *Triginta* and are holed up in some disreputable bar somewhere.'

'Unless one of the Blood King's people have gotten to them,' suggested the Prof.

Merlin scoffed. ‘They’re gods. Okay, idiots granted, but still…I can’t see them being taken out by a gang of bloodsuckers.’

The Prof raises an eyebrow. ‘I can.’

‘Dammit, you may be right. See if you can put some more feelers out. Try to track them down.’

‘Will do.’

‘I’ll give it a go as well,’ responded Merlin. ‘Then we’ll have another chat about it later.’

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CHAPTER 33

Rivan Barzani was the head of the two-hundred strong Barzani crime family. They were by no means the largest Arab criminal clan in Berlin, but they were the most respected. Or to be honest, the most feared.

There was a day when the Berlin underworld was controlled by the Cosa Nostra and, after that, the Russian and Serbian crime families.

But now that label went to the various Arab, Kurdish and Turkish clans.

Rivan had been dubbed by the Berlin based *Tagesspiegel* newspaper, as Berlin's youngest career criminal. He was a mere 38 years of age. And 14 of those years had been spent in prison. He was a man well respected and well feared by all.

Well, not *all* – because at this very moment he was trussed up like the proverbial Christmas turkey, and strapped to a chair with a sack over his head.

'You have no idea who you are messing with,' he screamed, his voice muffled by the thick, dirty sacking. 'When I get out of here, I am going to tear you all new assholes. I swear, you are deader than dead.'

Someone yanked the sack off his head – and Barzani found himself staring directly into the abyss. The thing standing in front of him was not human. Oh, it looked like it may have been humanoid at some stage, but now it was a bipedal monster. Huge, its face misshapen, covered in lumps and scars and suppurating sores. Enormous canines poked past its sneering lips, and as it moved, slabs of muscles shifted like tectonic plates beneath the fabric of its tailored suit.

And for probably the first time in his life, Barzani was speechless.

'I know exactly who you are, little human,' stated Belikov with a sneer. 'And that is the only reason you are still alive. For I have need of your particular talents, however meager they might be.'

Barzani was about to reply with a stream of invective, when the full power of the almost-complete *Triginta* struck him, overwhelming his senses and filling him with a white-hot desire to please this magnificent creature standing in front of him. It was more than love; it was more than need – it was a literal moral imperative to serve.

Glancing to the side, Barzani saw two of his trusted bodyguards, similarly trussed up and bundled into the corner of the room. Gags stopped them making any utterances, but he could see both of them were wide-eyed in fear. One so much so he had actually soiled

himself.

The mobster watched on in absolute horror as Belikov walked over to one of the bodyguards, lifted him to his feet, and casually sank his fangs into the man's neck, savagely whipping his head back and forth as he sawed through his muscles, veins and arteries. Blood sprayed freely across the room.

Then the monstrous being fed, suckling and grunting like a bloody, oversized infant.

Dropping the twitching corpse to the floor, the Blood King repeated the grisly process with the second guard.

And even then, Barzani could not quell the feelings of trust and love and dedication he felt for the blood-drenched apparition standing in front of him.

'Tasty,' laughed Belikov. 'Now, let us discuss how you will serve me. Your organization, your family, your goods and chattels – everything you have is now mine. You no longer exist in your own right; you exist merely as an extension of my largesse. Or, if you would prefer…' Belikov gestured towards the two slain bodyguards.

Barzani shook his head. 'No, master,' he said softly. 'I am yours to command.'

'As it should be,' agreed Belikov. 'From this day forth, you and your family will seek to destroy all other crime families in Berlin. If the law attempts to intervene, you will end them with extreme prejudice.

'To help you achieve this goal, I shall provide a team of *Nosferatu* warriors, plus two Chernobyl vampires. Do you understand?'

Barzani shook his head. 'Not really, master. However, that is of no moment. I shall obey, even if it costs me my life.'

Belikov smiled, a truly terrifying spectacle. Then he rubbed the crime boss's head. 'Good boy,' he said. 'Good, child.'

And Barzani's eyes filled with tears of mental anguish, as his brain attempted to override the feelings of dedication and devotion the *Triginta* was hammering into his inner psyche.

'Thank you,' he whispered. 'My lord.'

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CHAPTER 34

‘This is not the worst place to be right now,’ said Belenas as he took a gulp of his Manhattan cocktail.

Sirona nodded, her attention on the foaming, blue waves that rolled up on the beach.

They were sitting at an outdoor table in a restaurant in California. The weather was perfect, the people were pretty and the drinks were free-flowing and very well made.

‘I must admit,’ continued Belenas, ‘That visit to Grannus was a bit of an eye-opener. I reckon this whole California thing could work for us as well.’

‘I’m actually thinking about starting a health spa,’ said the goddess. ‘Sirona Health and Beauty. Hot springs, mud packs, all that crap. A surefire way to get worshippers.’

Belenas agreed. ‘I’m contemplating starting a chain of fudging comedy clubs and bars,’ he said. ‘After all, I am the effing god of laughter.’

‘I thought you were the god of depression now.’

‘True,’ concurred Belenas. ‘But I’ve noticed in this new world, it’s so close to the same carbuncling thing it’s almost impossible to tell them apart. Seems to me like every comedian I look at is depressed. Apparently, you can’t be funny in this brave new world unless you’re unhappy or miserable. Yep, I think California is the future for us. Loads of spare worship here.’

‘And the vamps?’ asked Sirona.

‘They won’t come to California, too sunny.’

‘Not at night it isn’t.’

Belenas raised an eyebrow. ‘That would be true.’

Sirona took a sip of her frou-frou cocktail and they watched the sun go down.

‘Yeah,’ said Belenas with a quiet sigh. ‘The night. Didn’t think of that.’

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CHAPTER 35

Milo Gruber was a *Kriminalhauptkommissar*, or Chief Detective Inspector in the *Landeskriminalamt*, or the LKA as it is known locally in Berlin. The LKA oversee only the most serious of crimes, particularly that of organized crime.

Milo was currently at a particularly gruesome murder scene. The Detective knew it was a favorite TV or movie trope to have someone at a grisly crime scene take a look at the horror and throw up. However, truth be told, Milo had never actually seen it happen.

Until today.

Fortunately, he was not the guilty party. It was one of the new recruits.

But in all fairness, Milo had come close.

The scene before him was indescribably horrific. The path team had yet to determine if there were three, or four bodies. Usually, a straight head count would put an end to that particular argument. But in this case, the dismembered body parts, crushed and torn flesh and preponderance of viscera precluded such attempts.

It looked like someone had taken the bodies and put them through a wood-chipper.

Except for one very disturbing thing – there was very little blood.

He turned to *Forensischer Detektiv* Willa Baumann, one of the forensic investigators. Female, small, dark, intense, vegan.

'So, Willa, that's the third this week, tenth one in the last month. Same MO?'

The girl nodded, biting her lip as she typed notes on her iPad.

'The same. Total dismemberment, followed by an almost frenzied destruction of the remaining body tissue and bones. But, as before, it appears the bodies were exsanguinated before they were mutilated. Hence the lack of blood.'

'Any idea who they are?'

Willa nodded. 'We have an idea, but can't confirm it until we've done full analysis of the stew of DNA scattered about. We have eye-witnesses claiming the victims are almost certainly members of the Remmo crime family.'

'Arabs,' stated Milo with a grimace.

Willa raised a disapproving eyebrow. 'Actually, Kurdish, not that it matters. Ethnicity has little to do with this. The last victims were Italian. The Pellegrino clan.'

‘All crime families,’ confirmed Milo. ‘Obviously it’s a war. I suspect the Barzani family.’

Willa shook her head. ‘They have also suffered deaths.’

‘A couple that we know of,’ stressed Milo. ‘Almost seventy ghastly deaths, yet they have only lost two. No, it’s them. My gut tells me. Haven’t the perpetrators left any DNA, any prints, any sort of evidence at all? Come on, don’t tell me the sites are clean, you lot have had ample time to do your lab work.’

Willa frowned, started to speak and then stopped.

‘Come on, Willa,’ prompted Milo. ‘Speak.’

‘Actually, it’s quite the opposite. We have tons of material, but it… not sure,’ she hesitated. ‘We can’t track down what the DNA is from. Or the fingerprints.’

‘You mean *whom* it is from.’

‘No,’ denied Willa. ‘What.’

Milo stared at the pathologist for a few seconds, thinking. Finally, he spoke. ‘What are you saying?’

Willa shrugged. ‘Nothing. It’s just that these things never end well.’

Milo chuckled. ‘How would you know; this sort of thing has never happened before.’

‘Actually, it has,’ said Willa softly. ‘A few years back. In London. Similar. Not the same.’

‘Okay, fine, I’ll look into it,’ said Milo. ‘I’ll speak to Interpol.’

‘*Ja*,’ laughed Willa. ‘Good one.’

‘I’m serious,’ responded Milo. ‘The British aren’t exactly cooperating with us at the moment. Not after Brexit. There is…well, animosity.’

‘The Roast Beefs always feel animosity. Comes from living on a rainy island, and always fighting everyone. But if that’s the way you want to go, get hold of this man.’ Willa took out her cell and messaged Milo. ‘Jonathan Edwards. He’s an Administrative Analyst in the head offices in Manchester. He’s as ineffectual as the rest of that Interpol shambles, but a good sort. Mention my name.’

‘Thanks, Willa. I’ll get onto that as soon as I can.’

‘Whatever, do what you can. And do it with some urgency,’ stressed Willa. ‘I have a very bad feeling about this.’

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CHAPTER 36

‘Berlin,’ said the Prof.

‘What about it?’ asked Emily.

‘Look at these,’ the Prof threw a sheath of photos onto the table. ‘A contact of mine sent them to me.’

Emily picked up one of the photos and frowned. ‘Either that’s BUMF work, or some Berliner has been feeding people into a woodchipper.’

Merlin took a look. ‘No blood.’

‘Yes, there is,’ argued Tag. ‘Place is covered in it.’

Merlin shook his head. ‘At a guess there’s the remains of three maybe four bodies in this picture. The average adult has around ten pints of blood. So that’s forty pints. A couple of buckets. The walls, floors, even the ceiling would be covered in the stuff. Instead, there’s merely a few spatters.’

‘Vampires,’ confirmed Emily. Then she picked up the rest of the photos. ‘Any more?’

‘As far as I know, there have been in excess of ten attacks,’ answered the Prof. ‘Probably sixty or seventy kills. My informant tells me, they think it is some sort of gang warfare. All of the victims are involved inorganized crime.’

‘We need to take a closer look at this,’ said Merlin. ‘I need to know why the Chernobyl monsters are getting involved in organized crime in Berlin. It makes little sense; they don’t need the money.’

‘Power,’ interjected Tag. ‘They’s looking to take over the city. Just like that Nathan Tremblay, traitor asswipe did in London.’

Merlin raised an eyebrow. ‘You know, Tag, you could be right,’ he admitted.

‘Sure, look all surprised, why don’t you,’ said the big man. ‘I’s got deductive skills; you know. I’m not just a pretty face.’

‘Not even,’ quipped Troy with a chuckle.

‘If your theory is correct,’ continued Merlin. ‘And I have no reason to think it isn’t, that means Belikov is making a play for Berlin. We need to get everyone on site as soon as. Emily, how long will it take the Pack to ride there?’

Emily thought for a few seconds as her eidetic memory pulled up a map of Europe and she calculated average travel times, stopping for gas and taking weather and traffic into account. ‘Just over ten hours.’

‘Good,’ nodded Merlin. ‘Troy, get them moving. Here,’ he conjured up a small business card. ‘This address. It’s my place in Berlin. Close

to the *Tempelhofer Feld*. Used to be an airfield back in the day, now it's a huge park. My place is next to it. I've got some serious glamours on it. We can all stay there and no one should be able to detect us. Even if we land the helicopter there.

'As soon as you've got the Pack moving, we need to get the rest of the team into the chopper.'

'I'll tell the bears,' said Tag.

'I'll get Muller's Marauders,' volunteered Emily.

'Right, let's move, people,' barked Merlin.

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Merlin's residence turned out to be a sprawling bungalow, half dug into the ground, its flat roof covered with turf, making it almost invisible from both air and ground. This natural camouflage coupled with a raft of strong glamor spells prevented anyone from seeing the place, or even looking at it. Any form of interest would result in a strong feeling of discomfort and a desire to leave the area.

Thus, the wizard managed to maintain a massive secret hideaway on over two acres of land in the middle of one of the world's capital cities.

Apart from a multitude of bedrooms, the dwelling included a vast collection of underground training facilities, including shooting ranges, a gymnasium and a running track.

Latobias landed the helicopter on the roof and the team of hunters, including the bears, debussed and began offloading their equipment.

Auto shotguns, ammunition, various other weapons and sundry supplies.

The bears had no weapons and only a small bag with some extra clothing for each of them.

'Welcome to *Drachenblut,'* said Merlin.

'Drakenwhat?' asked Tag.

'Drachenblut, it means Dragon's Blood,' explained Merlin.

Tag frowned. 'Why you call your pad, Dragon's Butt?'

Merlin stared at the big man for a full second and then decided not to answer. Instead, he continued his welcome speech. 'The residence is serviced by a family of low-boggarts,' he explained. 'They used to be Brownies but after being mistreated by a dark-mage, they transformed to the more malevolent version of the species.'

'Umm – not to offend,' interjected Troy. 'But isn't the Prof a boggart?'

'A High-Boggart,' answered Merlin. 'A completely different being. Anyway, I took the family in, provided them with food and shelter, and in return they keep the place spick-and-span. Keep an eye on them though, they do tend to play practical jokes, sour the milk

occasionally, that sort of thing.'

As Merlin was speaking, a gaggle of said boggarts appeared, seemingly just materializing out of thin air.

They were nothing like the Prof, who to all intents and purposes seemed human, apart from slightly pointed ears, a few too many teeth and eyes that flickered with an un-earthly power.

These creatures were more, Dobbie the house elf.

Communicating through mime and gestures, the boggarts led the members of the team to their respective rooms. A separate one appeared and took the bears outside to show them an appropriate spot to camp.

'I hope these Dobbie-dudes can cook,' mumbled Tag as he followed one of them to his room. 'Cause I's got a serious hunger on me.'

***

Just over an hour later, after they had eaten, Troy, Emily, Tag and Muller went into Berlin to get a feel of the city and do a general recon. They left the rest of the hunters at Merlin's German hideaway. The four team members walked without purpose, taking in the atmosphere, gawking like tourists and generally just relaxing.

Tag stopped at a street food vendor and ordered himself a batch of foot-long currywurst sausages.

'What they like?' asked Troy.

The big man shrugged. 'Crunchy. Spicy.'

'Give us a taste.'

Tag shook his head. 'Sorry, can't. Only bought six.'

Troy was about to put forward his argument that anyone who possessed six feet of sausage and wouldn't share, was less than generous, when Emily grabbed him by the arm.

She pointed to the roof of the massive, towering edifice of the Berlin Cathedral. 'Up there,' she said. 'Come on, let's go.' She moved fast, almost dragging the Omega off his feet.

The team entered the cathedral, practically running to keep up with Emily. On the right there was a flight of stairs with a sign that read, *Roof Access*, in both German and English. Emily paused, cocked her head to one side and then grinned.

'No,' she said. 'Not there.'

She continued to move through the cathedral, heading towards the back. Behind the altar there was an unobtrusive wooden door. Checking to see they weren't being observed, she opened it and beckoned for the others to follow her.

A narrow spiral staircase wound upwards; its worn treads barely visible in the gloom.

'This leads to the roof,' said Muller.

‘So did the other stairs,’ noted Troy.

‘The other stairs lead to the main dome,’ said Emily. ‘For the tourists. These ones go up to the secondary dome.’

‘How do you know that?’ asked Troy.

‘Someone just told me,’ answered Emily as they continued to wend their way upwards.

After another solid half-minute of high-speed climbing, Emily opened a door that gave them access to the roof. They followed her onto a narrow walkway that circled the massive domed roof, taking in the spectacular view as they did so.

As they rounded the first part of the dome, Emily stopped. In front of them was a large, lichen and moss encrusted gargoyle.

‘Gentlemen,’ she said. ‘May I introduce, *Granitfelsen der Aufseher*. You can call him, Granite.’

Muller and Troy greeted the gargoyle with nods.

Tag held his hand out. ‘Stone dude,’ he said.

They all waited as the gargoyle slowly raised his arm and extended his hand. A full minute later, he clasped Tag’s hand and shook it once.

‘Whisperer,’ he said to Emily. ‘We thought you had left this realm, and abandoned us.’

Emily shook her head. ‘Just a brief sabbatical, *herr* Granite. But we are all back in the hunt once more.’

‘That is good to hear,’ said Granite. ‘The stones tell of a disturbance in the natural order of things. Dark powers of old are resurfacing, and war once more raises its filthy head.’

‘How come all you German dudes speak such good English?’ asked Tag.

Granite turned to look at the big man, and then a sound like two rocks rubbing together issued from his mouth. It took the hunters a while to work out he was laughing.

‘Really?’ he asked. ‘I talk of the coming apocalypse, and what you took from that was, language skills?’

‘Just curious,’ shrugged Tag.

‘You are correct,’ said Granite. ‘Almost eighty percent of Germans speak two languages, and forty percent speak three. Whereas the English, only thirty percent are proficient in another language beside their own mother tongue.’

Tag grinned. ‘Yeah, well, we don’t need to talk any other language, everyone speaks English. And anyway, I’s fluent in Jamaican.’

‘Isn’t the official language of Jamaica, English?’ pointed out Emily.

‘Potato, potahto,’ said Tag.

‘In actual fact,’ interjected Granite. ‘I am not talking English. You are hearing English. If you were French, you would hear French.’ He turned to Emily. ‘I thought you knew that. We Gargoyles communicate

in a basic form of Enochian. Whomever hears it does so in their own language.'

'I was not aware of that,' admitted Emily. 'But now we are here, let me catch you up with what we're all doing.'

Emily told Granite the story thus far.

Granite nodded his acceptance of the events. 'I will get all of the Berlin gargoyles together to search for these Chernobyl monsters, as well as the normal *Nosferatu*. Also, we will keep a general watch over things and remain in close contact with you.'

The team bid the gargoyle farewell, and left via the winding staircase.

'I'm hungry,' stated Tag as they walked back onto the street. 'I reckon we got enough done today, let's get back to the Dragon's Butt for stew.'

'Blood,' corrected Troy and Muller together.

'Whatever,' scoffed Tag.

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CHAPTER 37

When the team got back to *Drachenblut* they were greeted by the sight of a huge smoking hole in the ground in front of the building.

They checked the perimeter quickly, but there was no sign of any sort of attack, and the bears were busy training in the forest. So, the team opened the front door and went inside to find out what was happening.

Merlin and the Prof were seated at the kitchen table.

On the opposite side sat three men.

'What's with the crater outside?' asked Tag. 'We been bombed or what?'

'No,' answered Merlin. 'However, we have been struck by a massive influx of stupidity.' He gestured at the three newcomers.

Two were indistinguishable young men. Obviously identical twins. They were dressed in leather pants and loose-fitting cotton tops. Their long hair tied back with leather thongs. Matching diamond earrings, and nose studs.

The third man was ancient. A long grey beard reached almost to his knees and a plait of hair hung to the small of his back. He was wearing a long iridescent blue robe covered with silver stars and moons, and a classic pointed wizard's hat. Next to him, leaning against the table, a six foot long, gnarled wooden staff with a crystal ball the size of a baseball on the top.

'Hey, a wizard,' said Tag.

The ancient raised an eyebrow. 'Have we met before?'

'Naw,' denied the big man. 'I'm just really observant.'

Emily hid a smile behind her hand.

Merlin introduced the trio. 'These two are, Faylinn.'

'Which one?' asked Emily.

'They are Faylinn,' replied Merlin. 'I just told you. Keep up, my girl. And this is, Karling the Venerable. He made the crater outside.'

Faylinn bowed, the two parts in perfect unison.

'Faylinn is pleased to meet you,' they/it said.

Karling nodded a greeting. 'Sausages,' he mumbled. 'But not with honey,' he shouted, shaking his head vehemently. Then he stared at Tag. 'I know you. I know your face. Have we met?'

'Yes, just now.'

Karling smiled. 'Thought so. Mind as sharp as a…a…one of those pointy things…'

‘Stick?’ ventured Tag.

The ancient shook his head. ‘Stick isn’t pointy.’

‘Is if you sharpen it.’

‘True, I like the way you think. What were we talking about?’

‘Sausages.’

Emily glanced at Merlin, who rolled his eyes and circled his finger to his temple. ‘Mad as pants,’ he whispered. ‘Mind you, I think he’s met his match with Tag.’

‘Now the introductions have been dispensed with,’ interjected the Prof. ‘Allow me to show you to your rooms.’

The trio left with the Professor.

‘The old fellow is as daft as a brush,’ exclaimed Merlin. ‘But an unbelievably powerful battle caster. As for Faylinn, bit of an unknown entity.’

‘So, this is the Winter Queen’s idea of reinforcements?’ asked Emily.

Merlin nodded. ‘Technically, they are a huge boon. Practically, I can’t help but get the feeling the Fae may have been ridding themselves of a couple of their more troublesome mages.’

‘You think?’ asked Emily. ‘They’ve only been here a few minutes and already there’s a huge smoking hole in the front lawn.’

‘That’s Karling,’ explained Merlin. ‘When he gets excited. Bang! He suffers from premature discharge.’

Emily shook her head and scowled. Then she proceeded to catch Merlin up on their meeting with Granite the gargoyle.

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CHAPTER 38

Milo dialed the cell number Willa had given him. It was answered on the first ring.

'Hello?'

'Mister Jonathan Edwards, my name is Milo Gruber. I am a Chief Detective Inspector with the LKA in Berlin. I was given your name by Willa Baumann.'

'Oh yes,' answered Jonathan. 'How is Willa?'

'Same, I suppose,' said Milo. 'Hard working, bright, vegan,' he chuckled.

'Well, what can I do for you?'

Milo explained what was happening in Berlin, the sudden rash of organized-crime related slayings, the odd manner of the deaths and the strange DNA findings.

He then mentioned that Willa said Jonathan may have been involved in something similar a couple of years back.

There was a long stretch of silence.

So long, in fact, that Milo thought the call had been dropped. But just before he was about to ring off, Jonathan answered.

'I'm not comfortable talking about that,' he said, so quietly Milo struggled to hear him.

'Any information would help,' insisted Milo. 'Please.'

'Okay, at the time I was with Scotland Yard. Chief Inspector. Serious Crimes unit. The Chief of Police put me onto an ongoing case that had many similarities to yours. Organized crime. The bodies horrendously mutilated. Strange, unknown DNA results. Many of the bodies had been completely exsanguinated. That means….'

'I know what it means, mister Edwards,' snapped Milo. 'Drained of blood. Continue.'

'Of course, well, none of it made sense. Finally, I ended up taking a leaf from Sherlock Holmes's book…'

'Sorry,' interrupted Milo. 'You mean the fictional detective?'

'The same,' concurred Jonathan. 'Well, Sherlock said, when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth.'

'A little trite,' ventured Milo. 'But I must admit, most likely true.'

'Yes,' agreed Jonathan. 'So, it was at that point I started to doubt my own sanity.'

'Why?'

‘The superhuman strength needed to tear the victims apart. The strange DNA, the draining of blood. Once I eliminated the impossible, it left only one conclusion, however improbable that may be.’

‘And that was?’ asked Milo.

‘*Nosferatu*.’

Milo waited for Jonathan to expand on his theory. But it appeared that was it. ‘I don’t understand,’ he said.

‘*Nosferatu*,’ repeated Jonathan. ‘Vampires. The undead. Also, werewolves. The DNA we found, some of it was similar to examples the Natural History Museum had. The Prehistoric Dire Wolf. The other was some strange combination of bat and human.’

Milo didn’t speak. The man was obviously mad, and what could you say to such a revelation?

‘Milo?’ Jonathan chuckled. ‘You think I’m a Loony Tune, don’t you?’

Still, Milo didn’t answer.

‘Tell me,’ continued Jonathan. ‘Has Willa tested for animal variants of the DNA samples?’

‘No.’

‘Ask her to do so,’ insisted Jonathan. ‘But a word of warning, Milo. Be careful, there are forces here you cannot comprehend. And the coverup goes deeper than you could imagine. The government, the police. Even the Vatican are involved. Do the tests, Milo. And look, don’t me phone again. I’m serious, this is not something I want to get involved with again. Ever.’

Jonathan cut the call.

Milo stared at his cell for a few seconds, then he shook his head.

‘Well, that was a waste of time. What an absolute fruitcake. I wonder if Willa was pulling my leg?’

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CHAPTER 39

Farouk wiped the sweat from his brow with a shaking hand.

Earlier that day, he had been the leader of the respected and feared Abadi crime family.

Now, they were all dead.

Every one of them, men, women and children.

None had escaped the massacre.

Not even the family pets.

Before this night, Farouk had never feared death. It was merely the end of life. He wasn't a religious man and did not believe in any form of afterlife, or any gods.

But that was a mere few hours ago.

Now he believed. Because he had seen the devil, and if Satan existed, then surely the reverse was also a reality.

Flipping open his revolver he checked to see it was fully loaded. Not that it mattered, he had already shot the demon three times and his bullets had invoked little more than an amused look.

So, he had run and hidden. In a bedroom wardrobe. Like a child playing hide-and-seek.

But instead of playing the game with his friends, he was playing with the monster that lived under your bed.

'I can smell you,' said the monster. 'I can smell your fear. I can hear your heartbeat. I can almost taste your blood.'

Farouk held his breath and cowered into the corner of the cupboard.

'Come out, come out, wherever you are,' chuckled the monster.

Farouk squeezed his eyes shut and held his revolver out in front of his chest with shaking hands.

And then the door of the cupboard was torn off and he was face-to-face with the monster.

Almost seven feet tall, inhuman slabs of muscle straining the material of its blood-drenched suit. Its monstrous face a landscape of tumors and open wounds and misshapen lumps of flesh.

Farouk tried to pull the trigger, but such was the depth of his terror he couldn't summon up enough strength to do so.

The monster reached out and, almost tenderly, stroked Farouk's cheek.

Then, with blinding speed, it lunged forward, tore his throat out with its teeth and began to feed.

***

Don Zanetti leaned back in his chair and rolled his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other.

'The Arab families are destroying each other,' he said, with not a small amount of satisfaction.

His *consiglieri*, Joey *'the Fish'* Valentini, chuckled. 'Yeah, and it couldn't happen to a more deserving bunch of people.'

Zanetti took out a gold Dunhill lighter and lit his cigar, turning it so the tip was a perfect glowing coal. 'I think it is time we took advantage of the situation,' he said. 'Tomorrow, we get the boys together and take back all the territory those asswipes stole from us over the last few years.'

Joey nodded. It was about time the *Cosa Nostra* regained its rightful position as organized crime frontrunners in Berlin. He was about to voice his pleasure, when there was a firm knock on the study door. Not the respectful sort of knock the Don was used to. This was more of an, open up before I kick the door down, knock.

Don Zanetti glanced at his Rolex and scowled. 'It's freaking midnight,' he growled. 'Who dares to disturb me at this hour?'

'*Avanti*,' instructed Joey.

The door opened and one of the Don's bodyguards staggered into the room. Holding him by the scruff of his neck was a tall, slightly built, extremely pale man. Long black hair, immaculate suit in a dark, raw silk.

Even though he was built like a male ramp model, and the Don's bodyguard was built like a linebacker, the slim man subdued him with causal ease, his strength obviously exponentially superior. Like a child holding a rag doll.

'What is the meaning of this intrusion?' blustered the Don. 'Do you have any idea who I am?'

The pale man smirked. And both Zanetti and Joey flinched. There was something wrong with the man's mouth. Neither of them could quite put a finger on what exactly it was. But if pushed, they probably would have said, there seemed to be too many teeth involved. Like a ragged-tooth shark. Or maybe a Sabre-toothed Tiger.

'Of course, I know who you are,' he replied. 'Which is why I am here.'

Zanetti glanced at Joey. 'Get rid of this punk,' he commanded. 'Now.'

Joey reached for the 38 special in his shoulder holster.

But before his hand could move more than an inch, the pale man threw the bodyguard against the far wall of the study with such force one could plainly hear his bones shattering. Then he blurred across the room, grabbed Joey's arm, and with casual force, tore it off at the

shoulder.

Joey's scream of agony was cut short as the pale man opened his mouth impossible wide, and ripped the *consiglieri's* throat out with his teeth.

Zanetti's cigar fell from his mouth onto his lap, burning through his trousers as it did. But he was too shocked and horrified to notice.

The pale man stared at the Don for a few seconds. Then he spoke.

'Firstly,' he said. 'I would move that cigar before it burns your dick off.'

Zanetti glooked down, and frantically swept the cigar from his lap while slapping at the smoldering material.

'And, secondly,' continued the pale man. 'You need to get out of that chair and get down on your knees.'

'I…why?' stammered Zanetti.

'Because you are about to meet my master,' answered the pale man.

The Don all but fell out of his chair in his haste to obey, dropping to his knees as he did so.

Then a monster walked into the room, and it took all of Zanetti's self-control to stop himself soiling his own trousers in terror.

The monster walked up to him and peered down, like he was looking at a pile of excrement. Or perhaps some variety of worm or slug. It stood over seven feet tall, massive slabs of muscle, and an oversized head with a face from a Hieronymus Bosch nightmare. Lumps, and tumors and suppurating sores.

Then it smiled.

And Zanetti's body finally betrayed him as the sight of the monster's teeth caused him to lose control of his bodily functions.

'My name is Jebe Zurgadai. But you may call me, Master. Now, mister Zanetti, I am going to explain to you your family's new position, *vis-a-vie* the current organized crime structure in Berlin. From this day forth, Zanetti, you will answer primarily to Rivan Barzani, and the Barzani clan. He, in turn, answers to me. And I answer to the Blood King. Do you understand?'

Zanetti screwed his eyes up in terror, then he shook his head. 'Sorry, master,' he croaked. 'I'm afraid I don't.'

Jebe nodded. 'It is good that you are afraid. Let me simplify things for you. If Barzani gives you, or anyone in your family, an order, you will carry it out immediately and to the best of your ability. If you do not, I will kill you, your relatives, your friends, anyone you have ever met, including your pets, and your friends' pets. Do you believe me?'

'Yes, master.'

Good. Now clean yourself up, it's disgusting, a grown man crapping his pants. Really.'

Jebe turned and left the room.

The pale man winked at Zanetti. ‘We shall be in touch,’ he said.

Then he disappeared at such a speed it was as if he had simply teleported from the building.

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CHAPTER 40

Jurgen stepped forward and held his hand out, his Hells Angels MC patch standing out in the light of the moon.

The huge, obese man opposite him looked at the proffered hand for a second, then he stepped forward and grasped it, his yellow and red Bandidos MC badge contrasting with the dark leather of his biker jacket.

'Dicke Man,' said Jurgen.

'Jurgen,' acknowledged Dicke Man. It wasn't his actual name, in fact, Dicke Man translated directly as, Fat Man. But it was a *nom de guerre* he accepted with pride.

They shook, expressions serious. These were two enemies who knew of each other, but were meeting for the very first time.

Behind each man, their respective crews, each numbering over forty well-armed men, breathed a sigh of relief.

They were men who did not hesitate to fight, inured to violence and possessed of less than salubrious morals. But they knew that in this particular situation, if things went wrong, there was every chance none of them would make it out alive.

And that was because, although the two gangs were usually mortal enemies, the person who had called the meeting was someone who commanded not only fear and respect, but awe.

Up until that morning, he was no more than myth and legend. A figure talked about by all motorcycle gangs, revered and almost worshipped, but ultimately regarded as most likely not to actually exist.

Until that morning when all had changed.

When myth had become reality. And the reality was even more scary, awe inspiring and deadly than anything they could have imagined.

That figure stood before them right now. Over seven feet tall, golden eyes, a palpable aura of leadership and command.

And power.

The authority of the Omega Wolf.

Pack leader.

All packs, including every Motorcycle Gang on the continent, even though they were not werewolves, they lived under the same pack mentality.

His Alphas had come visiting that very morning. He had called, and

they had come.

Troywolf cast his gaze over the collective gang members. Around eighty or so. The Hells Angels and the Bandidos MC.

'Brothers,' said Troy, his voice coming out as an inhuman growl, as his lupin jaws struggled with human communication. 'I have invoked the Biker Pact because a great enemy has declared war on mankind.'

There was a stir of interest from the crowd of bikers as they attempted to process the content of what the Omega was saying, as well as assimilate the fact that werewolves and The Pact was a real thing.

Troy turned to look at the group of Hells Angels. 'Angels,' he said. Your motto is, *When we do right, no one remembers. When we do wrong, no one forgets*.'

There was a cheer form the Angels and Troy nodded at them before he turned to face the Bandidos. 'And yours is*, Cut one, we all bleed.*'

Now it was the Bandidos turn to cheer.

Troy turned his burning gaze on them all again, drawing out the seconds before he continued.

'From this day forth,' he declared. 'You shall all have a new motto. A new maxim. A new creed by which to live.'

Behind the Alpha, the collected Pack began to change, morphing from human to wolf as he spoke.

The bikers gasped at the spectacle. Thewy all knew the tales of the Omega. The stories of the werewolves. And they believed.

But knowing and seeing are two very different things.

The bears, who were by their nature solitary, had not joined the get-together.

'To live is to suffer,' roared Troy. 'To suffer is to live. Pack.'

Then he threw his head back and howled.

The rest of the Pack joined in.

And as one, the bikers took a knee.

***

It was two in the morning, and all the wolves were back in human form. Many of them were throwing large steaks onto a barbeque, searing them just enough to warm through, and serving them up on heaping platters.

One of the Angels took a swig from a bottle of Jack Daniels and shook his head. '*Nien*,' he insisted, pointing at one of the Italian Pack members. 'You cannot be a biker if you ride a scooter. At best you could be a…a…what do the English call them, a Mod?'

The Italian, Guido, shrugged. 'Maybe. There is nothing wrong with being a Mod. But we are also bikers. Just because we ride a sophisticated, more comfortable, automatic transmission machine,

does not mean we are not an MC gang.'

'Of course it does,' snapped the Angel. 'MC stands for Motorcycle Club. Not, Pretty Boy Riding Piece-of-crap Scooter Club.'

Guido's expression changed for one of polite disagreement to one of outright fury. 'You insult my scooter,' he growled, his teeth elongating and fur erupting from his skin as he stood up.

'Relax,' said the Angel, holding both hands up. 'I'm sorry.'

But Guido wasn't buying his apology, and with a burst of movement, he sprinted across the clearing and, using his werewolf sense of smell, ran unerringly straight to the said Angel's Harley.

Then, with barely a grunt of effort, he picked it up over his head and threw it ten yards away.

The Harley hit the turf with a crash and the werewolf stalked back to the table, flexing his hands as he did.

Emily turned to Troy and raised an eyebrow. 'Aren't you going to stop this?' she asked.

Troy shrugged. 'Pack rules. And anyway, what level of idiot insults a werewolf?'

'True,' responded Emily. 'But what if Guido kills him?'

Troy merely shrugged again. 'Meh.'

The Angel stood up and pulled a Colt 45 from his belt. But before he could bring it to bear, Tag walked up and took it from him. 'Hey, that's enough, dude.' He turned to Guido. 'You too, friend. Sit.'

Guido stared at the big man, did a quick judgment on how any hand-to-hand would end up, and decided to do as Tag suggested.

Tag jogged over to the downed Harley, picked it up with one hand, brought it to the table and placed it next to the Angel. 'Here you go, dude,' he said. 'See, it's not so banged up. I sure we can buff all those dings right out.'

The Angel simply stared open mouthed at the big man who had just casually carried a seven-hundred-pound Softail across the clearing with one hand. Then he glanced across at Guido, who was still sporting extended canines and fur, although he had refrained from going full wolf.

And it was right about then his brain caught up with his balls, and he realized he wasn't in Kansas anymore. Or whatever the German equivalent of Kansas is.

He stood up and extended his hand to Guido. 'My name is Clemens Schneider, and I apologize for insulting your ride. Also, for being disrespectful. Please, forgive me, we are to be comrades and I would hate this incident to color our future dealings together.'

'Yeah,' interjected Tag. 'Or like, getting eaten by Guido here, 'cause sometimes werewolves tend to do that. Especially when you insult their girl.'

Guido stood and took Clemens hand. ‘I also apologize,’ he grunted. ‘Perhaps I overreacted a little.’

‘No way,’ disagreed Tag. ‘I know how you feel. If anyone insulted missus Jones, I would get medieval on their ass.’

‘Different,’ said Guido. ‘My Piaggio is an inanimate object, whereas Missus Jones is a…’ he paused, waiting for Tag to elucidate. When the big man didn’t Guido decided to enquire more directly. ‘Your mother? Girlfriend?’

‘In a way she’s both,’ answered Tag. ‘And also, neither. missus Jones is more my partner, and my protector.’

‘It’s what he calls his M134 General Electric Minigun, Guido,’ interjected Emily. ‘You’ve seen it. That six barreled rotary machinegun capable of firing over six thousand rounds a minute. It’s basically Tag’s carry gun.’

The wolves who had been listening in all burst out laughing. The bikers, not so much, as they stared openly at a man who could carry a Harley about, single handedly, and sported a gunship’s main weapons system as his carry gun.

Tag remained oblivious to the awe he was inspiring amongst the bikers. Instead, he turned to Clemens and asked. ‘Hey, how come you guys don’t make French stew and long bread? It’s really good food.’

‘We make German food,’ answered Clemens. ‘Surely you have tasted some?’

‘Yeah,’ admitted Tag. ‘And it’s good. But it’s mainly sausages and sour cabbage stuff.’

‘You had *shafel* or *eisbien?’*

Tag shook his head.

As he did so, Dicke Man walked up and sat down beside him, settling in the chair like a slow-motion avalanche. ‘My friend,’ he said. ‘You are in for a treat. The next few hours will change your life. Clemens, go to my hog. The right-hand saddlebag, bring the *eisbine, shafel* and the *bratkartoffeln*. Get Hans to prepare it on the fire.’

‘Bratwandonk-what?’ asked Tag.

‘Bratkartoffeln,’ corrected Dicke Man. ‘Fried potato with bacon, ham, onions and spices. Trust me, it’s very good.’

Tag grinned. ‘Dicke Man, I trust you. Hey, by the way, Emily tells me Dicke Man means Fat Man, how come you let the dudes call you that?’

‘Why do you let them call you, big man?’

Tag shrugged. ‘Cause I’s big.’

Dicke Man leaned forward and asked in a conspiratorial whisper. ‘And do I look thin, or fat to you?’

‘You don’t look thin,’ admitted Tag.

Dicke Man laughed. ‘Well, there you go.’

Tag joined in with the fat man's laughter.

Later, they bikers served the big man a platter of *eisbine, shafel* and *bratkartoffeln*. The *eisbine* was pork hock, slow cooked until the meat fell from the bones, so tender you could eat it with a spoon. The *shafel* turned out to be a smoked pork shoulder, roasted so the skin formed a crisp crackling, and the flavors burst in your mouth. And the potato dish was the most unctuous thing Tag had ever eaten.

Pork in all of its most wonderful guises.

The big man leaned back in his chair and burped. 'Now that,' he said. 'Is good food.'

Later that evening, Troy informed the bikers as to exactly what their role would be in the expanding hunter's setup.

He told them about the *Nosferatu*, and the Chernobyl monsters. And the Blood King's plans to take over Berlin's crime syndicates, and thereby lead on to taking control of Berlin itself.

Then he explained their job was to take out the *Nosferatu* familiars. To put a wrench in the vampires works. All and every gang member were fair game, as was any criminal that walked the streets of Berlin.

They would be provided with information and intelligence from the Prof and Merlin's various contacts. The fact that none of them knew who the Prof or Merlin were did not matter. All they needed to know was they were going to get information to work with.

He also stressed that, from this day forward, they were working on the side of good, if not particularly the side of law-and-order. But they had to refrain from any other crimes save those carried out in the name of the Pack and the hunters.

There was a general grumble of dissent, until Troy told them they could keep any bounty found on any of the crime families or common criminals. Plus, Merlin would pay every biker a six-figure bonus. He did not add the, *if you live* contractual rider. He figured it was unnecessary.

He then ensured they knew if they ever needed any backup, they should not hesitate to ask for it.

Finally, he told them never to take on any of the BUMF's. Not for any reason.

'If you even suspect you have seen one,' he stressed. 'Retreat and call us straight away. Get it?'

'Pack,' they yelled in response.

Troy smiled. 'Now keep on partying,' he said. 'Tomorrow we begin.'

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CHAPTER 41

‘It seems as though the Barzani clan are coming out way ahead of everyone else in this meltdown,’ said Dicke Man, leader of the Banditos. ‘They are headed by Rivan Barzani. A real hard nut, feared by many. Some of his men have been taken out, but as far as we can tell, very few. That would lead us to deduce that the Barzani’s are in cahoots with the vamps.’

Troy nodded, as did Emily.

As Dicke Man was about to continue speaking, Merlin walked in with Karling and Faylinn. ‘Couldn’t help but overhear,’ said Merlin. ‘Looks like you could be on to something.’

Dicke Man, who had yet to meet Merlin and was not used to being interrupted, raised an eyebrow. ‘Who the hell are these *idioten* old men?’ he snapped.

Karling frowned, and then with a flick of his hand and a mumbled incantation, he caused Dicke Man’s beard to burst into flame.

‘Rude man, sausage and sauerkraut. Not for amateurs, I always say,’ mumbled the ancient wizard.

Troy threw the contents of his mug of tea into Dicke Man’s face, extinguishing the blaze.

‘This is Merlin, Karling and Faylinn,’ he introduced the mages to the shocked biker. ‘I’d watch my manners around them, unless you want to end up as a flaming hors d’oeuvre of some sort.’

‘Wait, this is Merlin? The actual, like world famous Merlin? Like, our big boss? I’m so sorry, boss. They, I…’

‘Yes, and the actual Karling the Venerable,’ interjected Karling. ‘It’s all about peaches, don’t you know? Come on, Faylinn, let’s go and work on that scrying spell we discussed earlier.’

The ancient wizard stomped from the room, muttering under his breath as he departed. ‘Buries one sword in a stone, and suddenly it’s all about him. Morons and shrimp, the lot of them.’

‘I suggest we take out the Barzani clan,’ said Merlin.

‘I concur,’ agreed Troy. ‘I figure we gather as much intelligence as we can over the rest of this week, then we hit them hard. Full teams, bikers, wolves and bears. Muller’s Marauders can operate separately, together with Tag and whatshisname, that new fire mage.’

‘Umm, bears?’ questioned Dicke Man.

Troy chuckled. ‘Yeah, of course, you guys still haven’t met any of them. They tend to stay away unless we need them. Camp out in the

forest.'

'But what are they?'

'You know the wolves?' asked Troy.

'Obviously.'

'Well, same. But bears. Scary SOB's.'

'Emily,' said Merlin. 'Can the gargoyles help us? If we tell them we have declared war against the Barzani's, you think they could give us real time feedback?'

'Gargoyles?' questioned Dicke Man. 'Is that some sort of street gang? I've never heard of them.'

Emily stared at the fat man and then shook her head. 'No, they are not a street gang. They're gargoyles,' she said. 'You know, carved stone creatures, also known as grotesques. Primarily found in Gothic architecture.'

'And you can talk to them?'

'Clearly.'

Dicke Man shook his head. 'I'm getting all confused,' he admitted. 'This is all exceptionally heavy going.'

'You'll get over it,' said Emily, as she patted his arm. 'Now, as to your question, Merlin,' she continued. 'I'd say they're more for spotting vamps and such. Your standard criminal isn't really their remit. So that would be a no.'

'Okay, fine,' sighed Merlin. 'Let's get the Alphas together, plus Muller and the Prof. See what we can do to get as much info as possible on these criminals before we go on a rampage.'

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CHAPTER 42

‘Scholar, I thought this crass subjugation of Berlin would be below you,’ stated Jebe with no small amount of sarcasm.

Hadad laughed. ‘Just because I thirst for knowledge,’ he replied. ‘Does not mean I am averse to holding a position of power, and making use of its subsequent rewards. After all, I am not some sort of ascetic. I like my luxuries. As you know, I was not always a scholar, I was quite the warrior in my day. Although those days were many, many generations ago. I even fought alongside the Knights Templar, did my fair amount of sacking and pillaging. This is no different.’

Jebe nodded, and then left. He seemed not entirely convinced, but he nevertheless accepted the logic of Hadad’s statement.

Hadad smiled. ‘And mainly,’ he said to himself. ‘I want to get as close as I can to the seat of power, for how else can I attempt to prevent the Mad King from burning down everything we *Nosferatu* have achieved over the last millennia?’

But for now, however, he had to figure out how to keep himself alive while doing so.

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CHAPTER 43

Rivan Barzani stared blankly at the demi-tasse of coffee. He pushed it away using a single finger, noting the skin that had formed on the top.

How long had he been sitting here? Staring at nothing, his mind a seething cauldron of terror, regret, confusion and self-loathing.

'Boss.'

Barzani flinched.

'Hey, boss, are you okay?' asked Afran Moradi, his second in charge. 'It's just that the King said he was sending someone to take a look at the books. Get a report back on how things are going. It's no time to zonk out like that.'

Barzani frowned. There was a time, not that long ago - months? No, not even weeks. A time when the lack of respect Afran was showing him would have carried with it instant death. But now - now, quite frankly he couldn't give a crap.

His life was a living hell. He was working for the devil himself, and the things those monsters had done, and made him do, went beyond the pale. Even for a psychopath such as himself.

Barzani had never purported to be a religious man, but he attended mosque whenever he could. And he tried to obey the strictures of the Quran, in as much as he could, given his chosen line of work.

But he feared that he had now crossed the boundaries. He was convinced he may have committed the deadliest of sins. Or if not, he had come so close as to make the question moot.

The sin of *Shirk*.

He couldn't remember the exact wording, but the gist of it was basically – Do not ascribe partners to Allah.

In other words, don't worship false idols, do not give any other entity dominion over your soul, and do not partake in witchcraft or black magic.

And the Blood King, who considered himself a god, was now to all intents and purposes his ultimate leader.

He was following a being that was closer to *Djinn* than human. And there was no denying it was a product of ultimate evil.

Yep, Barzani was convinced. No *Jannah* for him. He would never see paradise.

He was bound for *Jahannam*. A bottomless pit of hell-fire for all eternity.

The door to his study banged open and one of the monsters strode

in like he owned the pace. Which Barzani supposed he actually did.

The ex-clan leader wracked his brain, but try as he might, he could not remember the thing's name. Instead, he decided to go with, *gospodin*. As far as he could work out, it was the Russian generic for sir, or lord, or friggin master.

It belittled him to refer to another as such. But he knew he better show respect, or the monster would likely rip his throat open and eat him.

By Allah, how he had fallen.

'Greeting, *gospodin*,' croaked Barzani, as he stood and bowed.

'Greeting, Kurd,' sneered the monster as he walked around the desk and sat in Barzani's chair.

'Some tea?' asked Barzani.

'Stop wasting my time,' snapped the monster. 'I am here for business, not to sip tea and chat with some lower life form.'

'My apologies,' replied Barzani, his voice barely a whisper.

Beside him, Afran Moradi said nothing. And when Barzani glanced at him, he could see that the man was literally paralyzed with fear, sweating profusely and as pale as a shroud.

Barzani allowed himself an internal grin He might be down, but at least he wasn't an absolute coward like Afran.

The monster settled back in his chair and looked like he was about to speak. But before he did, the sound of automatic gunfire sounded out across the building. Multiple rifles firing at once.

The monster moved. There were no unnecessary questions, no sign of surprise and no indecision. He simply went from sitting to running in a microsecond. And he moved so fast, Barzani felt like a Mac Truck had blasted past him on the highway.

Instead of following straight away, Barzani ran over to his gun cabinet and took out two Skorpion submachine guns and a handful of extra, fully loaded magazines.

'Hey, Afran,' he shouted. 'Catch.'

He threw the weapon at his second, who managed to catch it, even though he was still almost comatose with fear. Then Barzani stuffed a couple of extra magazines in both his own and Afran's pockets.

'Let's go,' he cajoled his second. 'We're being attacked.'

The two of them sprinted out of the study and headed towards the perimeter of the property. The bulk of the shooting seemed to be coming from the guards on the walls.

Barzani could only assume the remaining families had got together to launch an attack on his clan. Although it was barely believable, considering the swath the *Nosferatu* had cut through all of the opposing crime families of late.

Whatever, he wasn't overly concerned. He had a good bunch of

soldiers, plus he had been reinforced with three of those creepy *Nosferatu* vampires and that Chernobyl monster was on site as well.

So, whoever was attacking, they were in for a really bad night.

But as the two of them approached the wall, the ground shook, and then, in front of their eyes, the main gate exploded inwards.

And stomping through the resulting breach lumbered three of the biggest bears Barzani had ever seen.

Not that he had actually seen many. But these three were off the charts. Fully twelve to fifteen feet tall, most likely weighing in at more than an articulated truck, teeth like daggers and claws like swords.

And behind them, a pack of wolves larger than horses. Loads of them.

Such was Barzani's absolute surprise and disbelief, he couldn't even bring himself to open fire.

Afran, on the other hand, reacted in a totally different way. He dropped his weapon, screamed, turned and ran.

Barzani giggled. 'Another one of us going to the pits of hell,' he muttered to himself. 'For is it not said, to turn your back on the enemy and flee the battle is a deadly sin?'

Laughing hysterically, Barzani opened fire. Even as he did so, he registered he might as well have been tossing softballs at the intruders, such was the paltry effect of his weapon.

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Three days after their last meeting, Dicke Man had come to Merlin with the whereabouts of the Barzani headquarters. Merlin had tasked two of the wolves to do a thorough recce of the building, and based on their reports he decided it was time to strike.

And to strike hard.

After consulting with Troy, Emily, Tag and Muller – the hunters decided to go in heavy handed and raze the Barzani clan to the ground. Merlin wanted the Chernobyl vamps to know – it was on!

Both Merlin and the Prof stayed back, waiting outside the boundary walls that encircled the massive property situated on the outskirts of the city.

After some extended discussion about strategy, Tag had voiced his opinion.

'Look, it doesn't matter what we plan,' he said. 'It never goes like we think it will. I vote we just smash down the gate and go in all guns blazing.'

Troy chuckled. 'The big man has a point,' he conceded.

'I agree,' concurred Muller. 'However, maybe we send another smaller team around the back, see if we can take advantage of our frontal assault.'

‘Yeah,’ agreed Tag. ‘Let’s split up, we can do more damage that way.’

‘Fine,’ said Merlin. ‘Muller, you take your Marauders, with Tag and Shaun, and enter in their rear…’

‘Phrasing,’ chuckled Tag.

Merlin glared at the big man, and continued. ‘The Prof and I will cast an exclusion shield around the compound. It should prevent most of the sound and light escaping, and stop every cop in the vicinity reacting. The rest will enter via the front gate. Muller, I’ll give you four minutes then we hit the place.’

Muller nodded and headed off, his Marauders following close behind.

Merlin and the Prof immediately began their conjuring, weaving a complex structure of force that would prevent the sound and light show about to erupt becoming public knowledge.

Troy assembled the frontal assault team. It was made up of himself and Emily. Fifteen wolves, including German, French and Italian Alphas plus another four wolves from each pack. And three bears.

The Prof deduced they were most likely facing an opposition of around sixty, well-armed human gang members, perhaps ten *Nosferatu.* He was unsure how many, if any, BUMF’s may be involved.

Some would consider the size of the team of hunters to be overkill. But even if it was, Merlin had decided to go large in order to make a statement.

The four minutes timed out and the team moved forward.

The front gate, a pair of overengineered, cast iron monstrosities, were simply smashed open by Kirill, the bear Beta. Then the pack morphed into wolf mode and ran in.

As Tag had already noted, the best plan was to simply attack. And that is precisely what the team did.

The two guards at the gate were taken down in seconds, torn to pieces by the wolves. More guards flooded out of the front of the building, charging ahead, guns blazing. But it was to no avail. Some of the rounds struck home, hitting wolves and bears, but it was akin to a child throwing stones at a bison. Totally pointless.

But the hunters were there for retribution. Not to engage in a fair fight.

As they were attacking during the day, none of them worried about the *Nosferatu*. Not until they were inside the building and out of the sun, at any rate.

The wolves spread out, savaging the gangsters at will. At the same time, the bears headed straight for the front door, barreling through it as if it were papier mâché.

The booming sound of auto-shotguns echoed from the rear of the

building as Muller's Marauders made contact with the enemy. Then the roar of missus Jones filled the air, marking Tag's entrance into the fray.

Troy and Emily moved to the fore, pulling ahead of the rest of the hunters, kicking down doors and going from room to room as they searched for the *Nosferatu*, leaving the lesser human enemies to the Pack and the bears.

The third door was smashed aside to reveal a group of three vampires. As Troywolf entered the room, the blood-suckers attacked, hissing and screeching, their fangs bared, talons ready to strike.

But once again, Troy and Emily did their dance. Deathwalker swung, teeth tore and claws rent. Seconds later, the dismembered remains of the trio of vamps lay scattered about the room.

Troy and Emily moved on.

The sound of a hand grenade exploding thundered through the house, shaking the walls and shattering windows. It was followed closely by the howl of a werewolf in pain, and both Troy and Emily could feel the death of one of the wolves via their Pack mind.

The wolves carried on searching room-to-room, as did the bears. The stutter of automatic gun fire rang out in spasmodic intervals, usually accompanied by a chorus of lupine howls, or ursine growls.

Troy kicked open another door in the huge rambling house. As he did so, someone opened fire and three nine-millimeter rounds struck home, causing the Omega to stumble as he entered the room.

'Got you, wolf boy,' yelled Barzani gleefully.

Troy raised an eyebrow. 'Yep,' he conceded. 'That you did. Now it's my turn.'

Barzani frowned, then he burst out laughing. A high-pitched giggle. More a proof of his growing insanity than an expression of amusement.

He threw his weapon down.

'What's the point?' he raved. 'Really. I've had enough. Men that become wolves, wolves that don't die when you shoot them. Monsters that tear out people's throats and eat them. The whole world has gone to crap. Seriously, I give up. Kill me, don't kill me, whatever. Nothing makes sense anymore.'

Troy nodded understandingly. 'True,' he concurred. 'Things seem to have got a little out of control of late.'

Barzani nodded. 'So, are you still going to kill me?'

Troy nodded.

'Oh well, up yours, dog boy.'

Troy leaped forward and swung hard, decapitating the crime boss with one swift strike. Then he looked at Emily, his lupine face a picture of something approaching guilt. Or maybe simply compassion.

‘Had to be done,’ he said.

Emily shrugged. ‘Hey, no argument here. He was an insane, mass murderer. And he shot you. Three times. Come on, let’s keep going. There’s bound to be some ancients, maybe even a BUMF or two.’

The two continued their search and destroy.

***

Tag took point. It made sense; due to the fact he could take a few rounds to the chest with little lasting effects. Apart from the pain. And he had gotten accustomed to that.

Two gangsters popped up from behind a sofa and opened fire with a pair of Mac 10’s. Nine-millimeter slugs tore up the air around the big man, like a swarm of metal hornets. One clipped his ear, but the rest went wide. Mainly because, although Tag was big, he was still fast. Seriously fast. He didn’t fire back. Missus Jones was too ammo-hungry to waste on such unimportant targets. Instead, he simply hit the floor and let the Knights take care of the couple of criminals.

An auto-shotgun boomed, double-aught shot filled the air. Two more miscreants perished.

Tag leaped to his feet and continued forward.

Ostensibly clearing out. But mainly looking for their ultimate enemy.

The Chernobyl monsters.

There was a blur of movement as a single *Nosferatu* struck and retreated, tearing a vicious rent in one of the knight’s necks. Muller immediately ripped open a pack of QuickClot gauze and wadded it into the wound.

Tag burned off a half second squirt from missus Jones, striking the vampire with at least three silver coated slugs.

Shaun followed up with a fireball that exploded against the doorjamb as the vamp was exiting the room. The plasma stuck to him like Napalm, burning his hair off and sloughing the flesh from his face with its intense magical heat.

‘He shoots, he scores,’ crowed the young fire-mage.

Tag ran over to the downed knight Muller was attending. ‘Can I help?’

Muller shook his head as he stood up. His sleeves and the front of his shirt were soaked with blood. He had been unable to staunch the flow of blood, such was the severity of the wound.

He mumbled a quick prayer and then gestured for the rest of the team to follow him.

Again, Tag took point as they ventured further into the sprawling building.

A long corridor led to a closed set of ornate double doors. Muller

signaled for the knights and Shaun to move to the sides of the corridor, getting them out of the way of any possible incoming. Then he gave Tag the nod.

The big man swung missus Jones round to his back, rolled his neck, and ran through the massive oak doors, tearing them off their hinges like they were breakaway movie props.

And then he came flying back out of the room at the same speed he had entered. The sound of bones breaking was easily heard above the sound of his body striking the wall. Unconscious, he slid to the floor, almost every bone in his body reduced to mere shattered pieces of calcium.

'BUMF,' yelled Muller as he opened up with his auto-shotgun.

The rest of the knights instantly followed suit, as did Shaun. The inside of the room was filled with flame and silver coated lead shot, as hundreds of rounds boomed out as fast as the men could fire.

The massive amount of ordnance slowed the Chernobyl monster down, the multiple strikes hitting with enough power to reduce its forward movement to little more than a fast walk.

But it was still coming for them. And laughing at the same time. A high-pitched hyena-like cackle, a sign of insanity, rather than an expression of mirth.

'Fall back,' commanded Muller, as he reloaded and continued firing.

One of the knights grabbed Tag by his webbing and attempted to pull him with them, but unless he disconnected missus Jones, he was too heavy.

Then the corridor shook to the sound of a deep, thundering roar as Kirill and the two other bears entered the fray.

For the first time, the BUMF actually hesitated. Muller assumed that the appearance of the trio of humungous bears must have given it pause for thought.

But he was incorrect. The monster stopped laughing, and instead, its face was split by a massive grin. A truly awful sight.

'Bears,' he growled. 'Good, I hate bears. Time to die.'

The four behemoths sprinted towards each other, roaring and screeching as they did so. The initial collision was so powerful that the shockwave caused one of the corridor walls to explode outwards, like a series of Claymore mines had exploded.

The bears were strong. Almost as strong as the Chernobyl monster. But he was faster, and healed up at a far quicker rate.

However, there were three bears, and only a single BUMF.

Using brute strength and razor-sharp claws, the bears slashed and tore at the monster. And he fought back using his talons and his teeth. One of the bears launched himself forward and threw his arm around the BUMF's neck, pulling back with all of his might in an attempt to

rip the monster's head from his torso.

Instead, the uber-vamp reached over his shoulder, grabbed the bear by the face, and swung hard, smashing him into the floor with enough force to shatter bones and crush flesh. Then before any of the other combatants could intervene, the BUMF struck with both hands, his talons slicing cleanly through the top of the bear's head and removing his skull like he was slicing the end off a cantaloupe.

Blood and brains and chips of bone sprayed across the corridor, and the monster screeched loudly, reveling in his latest kill.

With a cry of rage, the two remaining bears redoubled their efforts, throwing themselves at the BUMF without thought for their own safety, revenge being the paramount emotion left them.

The knights and Shaun looked for an opportunity to add some firepower to the mix, but the melee was too close, and a friendly fire incident was more likely as not, so they had to refrain.

But then Tag arose, bones knitting together, smashed internal organs reforming and muscles gaining traction once again.

He swung missus Jones from his back. 'Hold him,' he shouted.

The two bears grasped the monster's arms and slammed him back against the wall. At the same time, Tag moved forward, pushing his newly healed muscles to their very limit as he piled on the speed.

With a mumbled apology to missus Jones, he rammed the barrels into the Chernobyl vampire's mouth, smashing through his fangs and separating his jaw.

Then he clamped down on the trigger.

A brief two second burst.

Two hundred rounds of hyper-velocity, silver jacketed, 7.62mm rounds traveling at over two thousand eight hundred feet per second tore through the BUMF's head, exiting his cranium in a welter of gore. The front of the monsters face simply folded in on itself, as the massive quantity of silver and lead hollowed out his skull and spewed it across the room in glorious technicolor.

'Heal that, you Big Ugly Mother F…'

Kirill picked the big man up in a massive bear hug. 'Thank you, my friend,' he growled. 'That was very good fight. You have done us proud. Boris can rest peacefully, now you have avenged his death.'

'Well, yeah,' grunted Tag. 'Us bears gotta stick together. By the way, I know I heal up real good, but I think you just broke all my ribs again.'

Kirill placed the big man back on his feet. 'Sorry, Tag,' he apologized. 'I sometimes forget how very frail you are.'

'I'll frail you,' muttered Tag.

'How can you frail me? What does that mean?' questioned Kirill, a puzzled look on his ursine features.

Tag shrugged. ‘Truth be told, no idea. Now let’s see if we can find any more of these butt-ugly monsters, and kill them.’

The rest of the hunters followed once more as Tag took the vanguard.

***

They had lost a wolf, a knight and a bear.

As well as that, another knight was badly wounded, and another wolf had lost a leg.

Both would recover, but it would take time.

Merlin glanced at Shaun. ‘You got enough juice left to torch this place?’ he asked.

Shaun nodded. ‘I think so, mister head honcho dude.’

‘Merlin,’ corrected the wizard. ‘Or sir, or even mister Wyllt. But the next time you refer to me as, dude, honcho, or any other variation of Californian surfer slang, I will remove your right eye. Understand, child?’

Shaun paled and nodded. ‘Yes sir, mister Merlin Wyllt,’ he said. Then he took a deep breath and began to build his fireball.

Merlin smacked him on the back of the head. ‘What are you doing?’ he enquired.

‘Drawing in energy to create a fireball, mister Merlin Wyllt sir.’

‘You’re doing it wrong.’

‘It’s how wizard Farcy showed me.’

‘Wizard Farcy? That self-absorbed, lame brained, complete ass. He’s not even a real wizard. More a back street conjurer with a dubiously attained tenure at the Thaumic University. Pathetic.’

‘What am I doing wrong, mister Merlin Wyllt sir.’

‘Just Merlin, young man. Come here.’

Shaun walked over to the wizard and stood before him, eyes downcast, shuffling slightly from foot to foot.

Merlin raised his arms and grasped the young fire mage’s head, one hand on each temple. ‘Now, just relax. This may pinch a little.’

Tag laughed. ‘Dude,’ he warned. ‘Brace yourself, in Merlin-speak, that means it’s gonna to hurt like balls.’

Before Shaun could respond, Merlin unleashed his spell. The knowledge pounded into Shaun’s consciousness with the subtlety of a rutting bull. Tearing open new neural pathways, bridging unused synapses and cleaning out incorrect information.

‘Hey, that wasn’t so bad,’ mumbled Shaun. Then he screamed and passed out, falling to the floor.

A splash of water from Tag’s canteen, followed by a few minutes of recovery time, and he was back on his feet, clutching his head like a man with the world’s worst hangover.

He stared in wonder at Merlin. ‘I know,’ he said. Then he laughed. ‘I know,’ he repeated. ‘How the…what did…I know.’

He rolled his shoulders, held his hands apart, and drew in the energy he needed.

Merlin looked on with a slight smile. Like a proud grandfather, or perhaps a teacher with a slightly slow student who has suddenly come good.

A ball of shimmering air coalesced between Shaun’s outstretched hands, then with a grunt of effort he launched the spell at the building. As it careened through the intervening space, it grew in both size and power, turning into a colossal ball of superheated plasma just before it struck the headquarters.

There was a slight pause, as if time had stopped – and then a massive thump as the building imploded, burning at such speed it collapsed in on itself in an orgy of fire. The spell burned so hot there wasn’t even a hint of smoke.

Twenty seconds later, naught was left but a foot thick carpet of white ash.

‘Now that is a fireball,’ said Shaun.

Then once again, he passed out.

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CHAPTER 44

The team had ostensibly broken the back of organized crime in Berlin and surrounds, and in doing so had dealt a serious blow to the Blood King's plans to take over the city.

However, nature abhors a vacuum.

And there was no shortage of criminal types looking to climb the recently vacated ladder and ensconce themselves at the top as the new godfather-about-town.

A fast-track to criminal success.

As a result, street crime exploded. And with it, the lesser *Nosferatu* houses joined in, hunting at night with near impunity in the cauldron of violent crime that now seethed through the city. Secure in the knowledge that neither the human law, nor the agents of the Blood King would be able to keep any sort of track on what was going on, such was the fast-escalating quantity of lawbreaking.

The sun had gone down some hours before, and most of the core members of the team were seated around the large kitchen table. Tag had brewed an outsized pot of his 'herbal' tea and was busy dispensing it, together with industrial quantities of sugar that he ladled into each cup.

Six days had passed since the Barzani family and its respective allies had been wiped from the face of the planet, and since then, the hunters had been in constant small-scale skirmishes as they tried to stem the tide of violent street crime washing over the city.

With their supernatural constitutions, the wolves, bears, Tag, Emily and the wizards were still fighting fit, despite managing less than two hours sleep out of every twenty-four.

Muller's knights, however, were beginning to lag. Their eyes underscored with dark circles of exhaustion, skin pale and nerves stretched taut.

As usual, Muller was still fresh and full of energy, despite the fact he was as human as the other knights.

Allegedly.

As Emily picked up her mug to take a sip, she stopped, the tea halfway to her lips.

Both Troy and Tag turned to face her. They had seen the look before.

Seconds later she nodded to herself.

'One of the gargoyles?' asked Troy.

‘Granite,’ confirmed Emily. ‘One of the gargoyles spotted a large group of *Nosferatu* heading for the International Youth Hostel in the Tiergarten District. He’s not sure exactly how many, but more than ten.’

‘I know this place,’ interjected Ursula. ‘If we take the bikes, we can get there in twenty minutes.’

‘I can drop you there in ten,’ said Latobias. ‘We’ll take the smaller helicopter. You shouldn’t need a huge team for a mere dozen *Nosferatu*.’

Emily stood up. ‘Right, Ursula, pick two of your pack. Shaun, you up for this?’

The young fire-mage nodded.

‘Anyone else?’

‘I wouldn’t mind coming,’ said Troy.

Emily shook her head. ‘I think you should stay here in case something else happens.’

‘I’m in,’ stated Tag. ‘I’ll bring missus Jones.’

And me,’ added Lorenzo, the Italian Alpha. ‘And I will bring two of my wolves.’

‘That should do it,’ declared Emily. Tag, me, six wolves and Shaun.’

‘And me,’ said Muller. ‘My boys need a rest, but I’m in.’

‘Right, let’s move,’ commended Emily.

And as one, they ran for the helicopter pad, stopping briefly to grab whatever equipment they needed.

***

Latobias conjured up his own ward to prevent attracting unwanted attention as they hovered above the street. The team leaped from the helicopter, jumping down from a height of over thirty feet.

They were about two hundred yards from the hostel, and Emily contacted Granite to get an update.

‘Gargoyles, Hornfels and Schist are on the roof of the church at the beginning of the street,’ he informed her. ‘The vampires did a full reconnaissance of the building and surrounds before they went in. They entered less than two minutes ago.’

‘How many?’

‘Thirteen,’ answered Granite.

‘There are thirteen vamps,’ Emily informed the team. ‘They ingressed approximately two minutes prior. Let’s go.’

She led the way, blurring up the stairs and smashing the double doors open. There was no time for subtlety. Speed was of the essence if they wanted to stop any unnecessary deaths.

The rest of the team sprinted after her, the wolves changing as they ran. Tag and Muller brought up the rear.

‘Upstairs,’ yelled Emily as her enhanced senses picked up the rotten meat and acetone stench of the *Nosferatu*.

As they ran up the curving flight of stairs, a high-pitched scream of mortal terror pieced the night.

The *Nosferatu* had begun to feed.

Emily headed for the sound, pushing herself to the limit, moving so fast she actually ripped up the cheap carpeting as she ran. Behind her doors crashed open and howls of anger filled the air as the wolves made contact.

Then the boom of Muller’s shotgun.

Emily smashed through the door, scattering splinters into the room. On the bed lay a young female, her shirt torn from her torso. Hunched over her, snuffling and grunting – *Nosferatu*.

Emily grabbed the blood-sucker’s neck and squeezed, interrupting its gristly feed.

But one look confirmed the girl was already a mere hair’s breadth from death. Throat ripped open; skin as pale as dough. Almost totally ensanguined.

With a cry of rage, Emily twisted the vampire’s head off, casting the body aside as she moved to the next room.

The hunters worked at such speed, and brutal efficiency, it was mere minutes before the place was cleared of the bloodsuckers.

Ursula, however, called her two warriors to her with a growl. Then she led them out of the hostel and onto the street.

Two of the vampires had escaped.

It took the wolves seconds to run them down. And then, in the middle of the street, they tore the pair of bloodsuckers to pieces.

Fortunately, the street was dark enough to cover the sight of what was happening. But the sound still carried clearly to all around.

Someone must have called the police, because seconds later Emily’s fine-tuned hearing picked up the distant sound of sirens.

Then Granite intruded on her thoughts.

‘Whisperer,’ he said. ‘Many cars with flashing lights are approaching. They will be there in under ten minutes.’

‘To me,’ commanded Emily. ‘We have police incoming. We need to bug out, now.’

‘No,’ argued Muller. ‘You need to take care of the victims. And speak to the witnesses. We cannot afford the general public to find out what is happening in their city. It will cause overwhelming chaos.’

‘How can we stop that?’ asked Emily.

Muller frowned. ‘We will collect them together, then you…’ he shrugged. ‘Do your mind thing. Make them forget.’

Emily snarled at the Knight. ‘I hate doing that,’ she said.

‘Woah, girly,’ interjected Tag. ‘I know your thoughts on the whole,

mind-rape thing. But you need to do something. Or, at best, everyone is going to think these poor folks is batshit crazy. Worst case, they lock them up to study them, and get every cop, soldier, detective and nutcase conspiracy theorist onto tracking us down. And that will surely make our real jobs super difficult. I agree with the holy-man. Also, if you block their memories, you gonna save them a lot of nightmares. Just be gentle with them. Can you do it?'

Emily took a deep breath. 'Gather them together in the dining hall. Be quick, we don't have much time. Also, make sure you get them all.'

Seven minutes later, Latobias drove the helicopter into the air and headed back to Merlin's hideaway. With the hunters were three corpses. Two had died from their injuries after the vampires had fed on them.

The third had been bitten and survived.

And there was only one thing to do to a survivor of a vampire bite.

With tears in her eyes, Emily dispatched the unfortunate young man. Then, with great gentleness and respect, she carried his body back to the helicopter.

No one said anything. There was nothing to say. It was their job.

Behind them, seventeen assorted young tourists were left huddled together in the hostel dining room. Their faces pictures of blank bafflement.

In the small courtyard at the back of the hostel, a pile of gray ash was already being scattered by the wind.

Shaun had used his new upgraded powers to totally incinerate the corpses of the deceased *Nosferatu*. Burning them at such a high heat the stonework floor melted into a lava-like state and was only now beginning to cool down and lose its dull cherry-red glow.

He also used short blasts of plasma to scorch the pools of vampire blood wherever possible. But this had only been semi-successful. Nonetheless, it was the best he could do in such a short space of time.

'Not the most subtle of take-downs,' noted Tag as they thundered home.

Muller snorted. 'All's well that ends well,' he countered.

'True,' acknowledged Tag. 'But then again, it hasn't ended yet, has it?'

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CHAPTER 45

Milo stared out of the second-floor window of the hostel, taking in the multitude of police cars, CSI vans, equipment and lighting trucks, and a mobile crime lab.

There were more people dressed in white paper overalls than he had ever seen at a single crime scene before.

And up to now, they had found nothing of any note.

There had been reports of gunfire, screams, obvious sounds of combat. Even a couple of eyewitnesses that swore they had seen some sort of running battle in the street outside the hostel.

But try as they might, none of the evidence made any sense.

Firstly, the alleged participants remembered nothing. Milo had been a detective for many years, long enough to know if a witness was simply not cooperating, or if they had genuinely not seen something. This was different. None of them remembered anything. Their last memories were of breakfast that morning. Since then – nada.

It was like some sort of alien abduction had taken place.

Secondly, there were no victims. Well, that was to say. No bodies. There were traces of blood. But it seemed like someone had taken an industrial blowtorch to it all and burned it to the point it no longer was of any use regarding DNA structure, or even the ability to test if it was human.

Then there was the back courtyard. The usual paving stones had been fused together into a glossy, single sheet of stone. Like it had been melted and poured, to set into a mirror like surface.

If there hadn't been so many separate reports of gunshots, it would have been easy to dismiss the entire incident as an elaborate hoax.

He saw Willa Baumann step out of the mobile crime lab and look up at him, so he leaned out of the window and gestured for her to come upstairs.

A minute later, she stood opposite him. Her hair pulled back into a tight ponytail, still clad in her paper overalls. Lips pursed and eyes slightly wild.

'What is it?' he asked, genuinely worried at her expression.

Without answering, she pulled a glassine envelope out of her pocket and handed it to him. He held it up to the light. Inside was a curved object. Approximately six inches long, maybe a little more. Ivory in color. The one end a jagged break.

'What is it?' he asked.

‘I haven’t shown this to anyone else,’ she answered, her eyes shifting from side to side. Breathing slightly strained.

‘Yes, but what is it?’ repeated Milo.

‘What does it look like?’

Milo shrugged. ‘It looks like a tooth. But obviously nothing has a tooth that size. It has to be at least six inches long.’

‘Seven,’ corrected Willa. ‘And it has been broken off. Most likely the full length is closer to eight or nine inches.’

Milo waited for a full answer.

‘Do you have a cigarette?’ asked Willa.

‘I don’t smoke. You know that.’

‘Dammit,’ cussed Willa. ‘Neither do I. But right now, I wish I did.’

She walked to the window and looked out. Then she sighed. ‘I found it in the street. Where the witnesses said they saw some sort of fight, although it was too dark for anyone to see anything in detail. I ran some tests on it in the lab.’

‘And?’

‘It is a tooth.’

Milo snorted his disbelief. ‘Never.’

‘Yes, it is,’ snapped Willa.

‘Okay, sure,’ returned Milo. ‘A tooth from what?’

Willa turned to face him. Then she answered, her voice so low as to be almost a whisper. ‘A human,’ she said.

And before Milo could react, she continued. ‘But not only human,’ she whispered. ‘There were also traces of wolf. Direwolf, to be exact.’

‘Direwolves are extinct,’ retorted Milo.

Willa nodded. ‘But we have found many examples of their teeth. With enough usable DNA to catalogue.’

Neither of them spoke for fully five minutes.

Willa because she was still trying to absorb the information.

And Milo because he was going over a recent conversation in his head.

‘Jonathan Edwards asked me if you had tested any of the scene-of-crime evidence for animal DNA. Then he said to me, *Milo, when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth*. After that, he warned me never to contact him again.’

Willa stared at the detective for a while. Then she said one word.

‘Werewolf.’

And Milo’s life changed forever.

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CHAPTER 45

The criminal element in Berlin had finally realized the truth in the old adage – *crime doesn't pay.*

Particularly when a group consisting of werewolves, werebears, Knights of the Holy See, combat mages, grand wizards, the Immortal featuring missus Jones, and the Daywalker, are dead set against it.

In fact, after its initial ramp-up, street crime in particular had dwindled to the point that it was now at its lowest level in recorded history.

It was now quite feasible to leave a wad of cash on the street and come back a few hours later to, either collect it, or find a note telling the rightful owner it had been handed in to the nearest cop or police station.

Because when the consequences of your criminal action include being torn to itty-little-bits, let's just say - you tend to think very long and hard about crossing the line between the legal and the not-so-legal.

'It's time to make our move on the Blood King,' stated Merlin.

'Isn't he ensconced in *Pareen*?' asked Troy. 'That's going to make a frontal attack, or any sort of attack, difficult. All they have to do is guard the entrances. Plus, the collateral damage would be huge.'

'Agreed,' said Merlin. 'But he isn't always in Pareen. He often travels back to his castle in Russia. The problem is, his trips are random. However, with Latobias that doesn't matter that much, bearing in mind we can get anywhere on the planet in ten minutes. But it does mean we shall have to keep the entire team on constant standby, ready to go at a moment's notice.

'Troy, Emily, Muller – make sure everyone is ready and fully kitted out. Ammunition, weapons, the whole nine yards. The Prof and I will sort the Fae mages, and ensure Shaun is as upgraded as we can get him. Any questions?'

There was a mumble of assent, and then Tag put his hand up.

'Yes?' acknowledged Merlin.

'Why don't we just carpet bomb the Mad King's place when he gets there. Seems to me like a bit of stand-off destruction could be the way to go.'

'Good question, big man,' acceded the wizard. 'Problem is, although I am extremely well connected, I am not connected enough to obtain military grade ordinance of mass destruction. Not at the level it would

need to end that hive of monsters at any rate.'

Tag shrugged. 'Fair enough.'

'Anyone else?'

No one had anything else to add, so without further ado, they began to prepare.

***

At the same time, Milo was talking to Willa. They were not in either of their offices. Instead, they sat on a bench in the *Thoedor-Wolff* Park. An apt name, considering the subject matter they were discussing.

In front of them, the fast-flowing *Spree* River ran freely, swollen from recent rains.

'Edwards also mentioned vampires,' said Milo.

Willa nodded. 'Normally, I would scoff at that. But after seeing that tooth, and combining it with the rest of the evidence – well, what can I say? Werewolves, vampires. It's obviously all true. Gods, no wonder Jonathan lost his job, the powers that be must have thought him insane.'

Milo shook his head. 'On the contrary, I think he lost his job because they knew he wasn't insane. Think about it, Willa, if the general public knew, beyond doubt that werewolves and vampires were real, what would happen?'

'Panic.'

'Exactly. Goodness, just look at the destruction they have caused in Berlin, and to all intents and purposes, this seems like a small-scale war compared to what Jonathan Edwards hinted at.'

'So, what are we going to do about it?' questioned Willa. 'I mean, they're evil, aren't they?'

Milo shrugged. 'According to the movies, I suppose so. Mind you, some vampires are good. Like the Cullen's in Twilight.'

Willa frowned. 'True, but what about Tom Cruise in Interview with a Vampire?'

'I think werewolves are usually good,' ventured Milo. 'Scott Howard in Teen Wolf. Oz in Buffy.'

Willa shrugged. 'Whatever. Can't base our plans on comics and TV. But it seems like it is the werewolves wiping out crime. Hell, the streets of Berlin have never been safer. Like, ever.'

Neither spoke for a bit. Then Willa took a box of cigarettes out of her purse, and a Zippo. She lit up, took an experimental drag and collapsed in a fit of coughing.

'Really?" said Milo. 'You're a smoker now?'

Willa shrugged. 'Yeah. It's that or go insane. My hands shake all the time.'

'Why?'

‘Terrified. And you?’

‘Marginally. It’s a bit frightening to know that monsters are real.’

Willa finished her cigarette, she stood up and walked towards the river.

Milo followed her.

They stood on the bank for a while.

She took the tooth out of her purse. Looked at it, and with an overarm throw, hurled it out into the river. It sank without a trace.

Milo raised an eyebrow. ‘Why did you throw the tooth away?’

Willa turned to him. ‘What tooth?’

Milo smiled. ‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘My mistake.’

Willa held her hand out.

Milo took it.

Then they walked, hand in hand, from the park and back into their lives.

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CHAPTER 46

The bars of the castle's dungeon jail were specially constructed to withstand an attack from one of the Chernobyl Vampires.

Twelve-foot-thick reinforced concrete walls, sheathed in silver-plated titanium.

The bars were as thick as tree stumps. So large that a normal human would be unable to grasp his hands if he embraced them. These too were manufactured from cast titanium sheathed in pure silver.

The designer could have simply made a massive door with a small slide to put food through, but the bars were insisted upon by the Blood King.

It allowed him to observe his victims more easily.

To harangue them.

To see them suffer.

But right now, the Blood King was still in *Pareen*.

On the outside of the cell sat the scholar, Ali Hadad.

And languishing in the ultra-high-security dungeon was none other than, Jebe Zurgadai. Once the right hand of the Blood King, now deemed traitor and subversive by the very being he had served so faithfully for almost a millennium.

'I don't think that even I can get you out of here, my friend,' stated Hadad.

'And I did not ask you to,' replied Jebe. 'If the *Krov Tsar* deems in necessary, then here I shall stay.'

Hadad snorted and shook his head. 'Really, Zurgadai, sometimes you are so noble you make my fangs itch.'

Jebe stood tall, his head held high as he sniffed disdainfully, conveying his lack of caring regarding Hadad's opinion of him and his loyalty.

'I warned you,' continued Hadad. 'He's gone completely insane.'

'Soon he will find the last piece of the *Triginta*,' replied Jebe. 'Then all will be well. It's just that he's unbalanced at the moment. He needs the final part of the necklace.'

'Unbalanced?' laughed Hadad. 'He's a little more than unbalanced,' he continued. 'In fact, he's fallen over. Come on, my friend. For example, this whole Berlin thing has been a disaster. All we have succeeded in doing is cleaning up the crime for the humans. Dammit, we are supposed to be the epitome of darkness, not the bloody Good Deeds Squad. Pathetic.'

‘And who’s fault was that?’ asked Jebe. ‘If memory serves, it was your idea to infiltrate the criminal strata and leverage it up to a general takeover.’

Hadad had the good grace to look a little embarrassed. Although the subtlety of his expression was difficult to gauge on his ravaged features. ‘True,’ he admitted. ‘I badly underestimated the power of the Hunters.’

‘You should not have. Merlin, the Professor. The Knight. The Daywalker, the Omega.’

Hadad waved the accusations away. ‘Whatever. The point is, the Mad King is blaming you. What can I do to help?’

Jebe shrugged. ‘As I said,’ he answered. ‘Once he has the final piece of the *Triginta*, all will be well. If you want to help, bend all of your efforts to tracking that piece down.’

Hadad stood. ‘I will do so, my friend,’ he assured Jebe. ‘I promise.’

Jebe nodded his thanks.

And when Hadad left the room, he could feel the power of the final piece that he carried with him constantly now, burning a hole into his very soul.

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CHAPTER 47

‘He’s on the move,’ yelled the Prof as he ran into the kitchen. ‘My contacts have seen him and his entourage landing at an airport local to the Chernobyl area.’

‘Right, Troy, Emily, let’s get the team ready,’ commanded Merlin. ‘Everyone. I’ll get Faylinn and Karling.’

***

Latobias dropped the team some twelve miles from the Blood King’s castle. He had been unable to get any closer due to the prolific number of patrols that ringed the area. Literally hundreds of human guards. All well-armed and obviously well trained. There was also a score of drones in the air as well as evidence of cameras, trip wires and motion detectors.

The entire zone was locked up tight.

‘Dammit,’ cussed Merlin. ‘I was hoping we would get the drop on the Mad King and his crew. What with getting here in ten minutes. But now it looks as though they’ll get to the castle before us. Not like we can move through all this security at speed. Particularly if we want to maintain the element of surprise.’

‘I’ll range ahead with a few of the wolves,’ said Troy. ‘We can take out the patrols.’

‘I’ll come with,’ added Emily. ‘So I can disarm the trip wires and booby traps.’

‘You’ll need me,’ said Faylinn, his dual voice ringing with his usual odd timbre.

Troy raised a questioning eyebrow.

‘The infrared beams and the cameras,’ explained Faylinn. ‘I am good with human technology. One of the reasons the Winter Queen sent me.’

‘And the fact you tend to creep her out,’ interjected Karling with a snort.

Faylinn stared coldly at the ancient wizard. Unblinking, before he nodded. ‘Yes. There is that.’

‘Good,’ agreed Troy as he sent out a mental pulse to the ten wolves he wanted to accompany him. ‘Let’s move out. We will need to observe for a while first. No good taking out a patrol just before they are scheduled to be back at the castle. That would defeat the object

and we'll lose our element of surprise.'

As one, they all changed and followed the Daywalker and their Omega.

Emily glanced at Faylinn as he/they ran alongside her. They were moving at a speed slightly faster than an Olympic sprinter, through heavy snow, in silence. She wondered if the dual-mage would be able to keep up. It surprised her to note that Faylinn kept pace with ease. In fact, he/they didn't even leave footprints in the snow.

Emily chuckled to herself as visions of Legolas from Lord of the Rings popped into her head.

Within minutes Troy pulsed a thought to the pack. Again, Emily was impressed as she noticed that Faylinn obviously heard the thought. There was more to the dual-aspect mage than she had at first thought.

'Patrol ahead,' pulsed Troy. 'Six males. Human. I can smell gun oil. Automatic weapons. Wait here, I will go forward and observe.'

Troy ran forward, keeping low and to the shadows.

Twenty minutes later he reappeared.

'Looks like we're in luck,' he said quietly. 'I overheard them talking to their HQ, they are approximately two hours into their patrol, and judging from their equipment, small tents, food and water, I reckon they most likely will stay out for at least twenty-four hours. I also heard them confirming that all the other patrols had been inserted. So, it looks like we have a window until close to this time tomorrow.

'Right, Pack, we split, flank them, Emily, you and I will hit them front on. We need to take them out before they have a chance to report our attack.'

'Leave that up to me,' said Faylinn. 'I will disable their communication devices.'

'You can do that?' questioned Troy.

'I just said I could,' replied Faylinn, his thoughts echoing as strangely as his dual-voice did. Like two people talking exactly the same, but microseconds apart. It was disconcerting. Like listening to a long-distance phone call with an echo and a delay on it.

The pack split, flanking the patrol, slinking unseen through the trees and the snow. Meanwhile, Faylinn went down on his knees, pointed his arms in the direction of the patrol and sent a beat of energy out.

To Emily's enhanced senses it looked like a wave of heat, but she could smell ozone, and at the very edge of her hearing a sound like a mosquito on steroids. Or maybe a dentist's drill on speed.

A few seconds later Faylinn turned to her and nodded. 'It is done.'

'I'm going to check for physical traps,' she pulsed Troy. 'Wait until I give the all clear.' And with that she blurred into motion, skirting the patrol at vampire speed. Halfway around the circuit she spotted a low-lying monofilament, the sun picking it up against the pristine white

snow. Extending a talon, she sliced through it, then continued her high-speed search.

That was the only booby trap in the immediate area, so she pulsed Troy.

'Go for it.'

The wolves on the flanks charged across the snow, tearing into the patrol with tooth and claw.

Not one of the humans got a single shot off before the snow was painted red with their life's blood.

Emily saw one of them talking frantically into a handheld radio, but it was obvious the unit was no longer working.

He died with a puzzled expression on his face.

'Cool,' thought Emily to herself. 'Looks like we got ourselves our very own portable EMP generator. Pop goes all electronic countermeasures.'

The team cleared up another three patrols before they had a mishap.

As they had done before, Faylinn disabled all of their electrical equipment. Emily checked for trip wires and booby traps, then the split pack advanced on the patrol.

But as they advanced, a Switchblade weaponized drone lifted out of the forest some three hundred yards away and flew straight into the attacking wolves.

The Switchblade has no weapons system as such, instead the entire drone is simply a bomb, packed with an explosive similar to a 40mm grenade. And all the Switchblade does is fly into the closest target its camera acquires, and then it explodes.

The drone struck one of the German wolves, Kirk Boshoff, on the left side of his head. Anywhere else on his supernaturally enhanced body and he would almost certainly have lived. However, even a werewolf cannot survive a 40mm round of high-explosive to the temple.

Troy immediately pulsed the rest of the wolves present to control their emotions, preventing them from howling out their anguish and alerting any of the other patrols.

After that, they cleared up the rest of the humans without further ado.

Leaving Kirk's body where he fell, they moved on, heading towards the castle.

'Do you think the drone sent a message to the castle?' asked Troy as they ran.

Faylinn shook his head. 'It has an extremely short range of communication. The drone itself relies on using the patrol's radios as a booster signal. However, as you know, I had already disabled those.'

‘Good,’ said Troy. ‘Still running on a streak of good luck. Not sure if they have any sort of radio-in protocols in place, but we can only hope they don’t.’

Three hours later they lay prone on a small hill and observed the Blood King’s domain. The castle squatted next to the river, a huge bleak stone affair. No towers, simply large block-like structures and high crenelated walls with lookout points every hundred feet or so.

As they watched, a Russian Ansat Aurus helicopter clattered over the horizon and headed towards the keep.

‘Most likely the Mad King and his entourage,’ muttered Emily. ‘Hey, Faylinn, reckon you could bring that down with your EMP thing?’

The dual-aspect mage shook his head. ‘Too far away. Also, too large. Not enough power. Sorry.’

No worries,’ growled Troy. ‘We’ll just have to off him the old-fashioned way.’

And he pulsed a command to the Merlin and the rest of the pack.

‘The way is clear. Wait until nightfall and come in under the cover of darkness.’

Merlin pulsed back in the affirmative.

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CHAPTER 48

‘There are three ingress points,’ said Troy. ‘All bad, but some are worse than others. First, the front gate. That’s a definite no-go. Too many guards, double gate with portcullis.

‘Then there’s the secondary entrance at the back. Not as well guarded, but looks like it’s never used. So the gate is shut on a semi-permanent basis. Loads of welding and heavy fixtures.

‘Finally, the delivery entrance on the side. More guards, but the gate itself is relatively flimsy. I reckon the bears could take it down. Or failing that, Shaun.’

‘I concur,’ agreed Merlin. ‘It’s a full-on assault via the delivery entrance. Muller, you and your Knights will engage any of the human guards, leave the *Nosferatu* to the bears and the wolves...’

‘Bears and wolves and Knights, oh my,’ interjected Tag with a grin.

Merlin glared at the big man and then shook his head. ‘Idiot. And when we come across any of the BUMF’s, we know the score, everyone hit them with everything you have, but no head-on assaults.’

The team moved out, skirting the castle and sticking to the surrounding forest, using the night as cover.

A combined total of over forty supernaturals, magicians and Knights. A force capable of overthrowing many a small country.

But would it be enough to take out the three score Chernobyl Monsters?

And survive?

***

Hadad strode along the corridor and into the castle’s communications center.

‘Have any of the patrols been in contact in the last twelve hours?’ he asked the familiar at the central desk.

‘No, sir,’ answered the comms officer. ‘But that’s not unusual. Unless they have something to report then they usually maintain radio silence. May I ask why, sir?’

‘Got a feeling,’ said Hadad. ‘And when you have been around for as long as I have, you tend to put rather a large amount of faith in your feelings.’

‘Would you like me to make contact with one of the groups, sir?’

Hadad nodded. ‘Immediately.’

The comms officer fiddled with the radio and then leaned towards the microphone. ‘Base to patrol ten, come in patrol ten.’

The two waited for a few seconds and then the officer repeated his request. Frowning, he dialed in another frequency and tried again, this time calling on patrol eight.

No response.

Frantically he moved to the next channel.

But Hadad was already moving, sprinting down the corridor fast enough to appear as a mere blur to any human onlookers.

‘Guards to the walls,’ he shouted. ‘Toll the alarm bell. Stand to.’

Before the bell began to toll, the sound of a massive explosion, followed by automatic gunfire pierced the night.

And the scholar knew his portentous feelings were correct.

The castle was under attack.

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CHAPTER 49

Shaun flung a fireball at the delivery entrance, and three of the bears followed close behind it.

The ball of plasma struck the gates and exploded, almost but not quite knocking them down. The trio of ursine muscle however, made short work of it, slamming the doors into the castle's courtyard.

Gunfire rang out as the Knights and the Italian wolves opened up on the guards.

At that moment, a bell began to ring, a call to arms.

More armed guards and a score of *Nosferatu* boiled out of the castle and into the keep. The wolves and bears charged at the vampires while Muller's Marauders and the Italians continued to lay down withering sheets of fire at the human familiars, decimating their ranks with their well-aimed fusillades.

The vampires were no match for the combination of overwhelming werebear strength and wolven speed. The wolves would hamstring the *Nosferatu* and then tag in a bear who would tear the bloodsucker apart, limb from limb.

The first BUMF arrived some four minutes into the opening contact, leaping from one of the third-floor windows, straight into the middle of the fray.

The monster roared his defiance, totally secure in the knowledge he was the ultimate killing machine.

The apex predator.

And perhaps he was. But he was also facing a team of well drilled supernatural hunters with a Pack mind that fought as a single unit.

Plus, a bevy of combat mages, a team of Holy Knights, an Omega, a Daywalker, an Immortal – and missus Jones.

In the space of one and a half seconds, a mere blink of an eye, over two-hundred-and-fifty silver laced, high power rounds struck the Monster. A combined weight of almost ten pounds of super-high-velocity metal, travelling at speeds in excess of three thousand feet per second.

This is the rough equivalent of being struck by a round fired from the main weapon of the M1 Abrams Main Battle Tank.

In short, no matter how high up you are on the food chain, this is going to seriously mess with your day.

Then two bears and six wolves piled onto the falling body and ripped it to shreds.

‘Now that’s what I’m talking about,’ yelled Tag as he fired a couple of short bursts at the remaining few Familiars, tearing many of them almost in half.

The next three Chernobyl Vamps arrived at the same time, together with a large group of gibbering, keening, drooling Grinders, the brain-fried under-vampires that were little more than vicious animals.

And the fight truly began.

The bears split into three groups, each one attacking a Monster. Likewise, the wolves did the same, using their speed and agility to do what they could to hamstring the BUMF’s and slow them down enough to allow the bears to get up close and personal.

Meanwhile, the Knights, Tag and the mages kept the Grinders and the *Nosferatu* at bay.

More Uber-vamps began arriving, and Merlin grabbed Shaun by his arm. Then he called to the Prof and Karling. ‘Help me,’ he yelled. ‘I want to boost young Shaun’s fire ability, link your power to me and I will channel through him.’

‘Umm – is that safe?’ asked Shaun.

‘Not at all,’ answered the Prof. ‘Too much power and Merlin will fry you like a carbonized sausage.’

‘Stop being such a wimp,’ commanded Karling. ‘Man up, child. I’m sure Merlin will be gentle. Or not, whatever. Now concentrate, this is most likely going to smart a little.’

A visible aura of power rose up from both the Prof and the ancient battle mage, linking to Merlin with a coruscation of blue sparks.

Merlin placed his hand on Shaun’s left shoulder, and the wave of power drained into the young mage.

Shaun yelped as his clothes began to smolder.

Well, don’t just stand there, boy,’ shouted Merlin. ‘Use the energy before it burns you up. Pick a BUMF and immolate the SOB.’

With a grimace of pain, Shaun pointed at one of the Monster’s that was currently lurking on the edges of the battle. With a thought, he conjured up a ball of plasma and ejected it at the uber-vamp.

It was like the sun had risen in the night, so bright was the seething ball of flame. White hot, the size of a beachball, it launched across the intervening space faster than a high-powered rifle bullet and struck the BUMF in the chest.

The result was nothing less than spectacular.

One moment, there was a six-foot seven inch, three hundred and thirty pound, deformed and grotesque monster baring his fangs and roaring.

The next – nothing.

Not even a pile of ash, or a few smoking remains.

Simply, a complete absence of aforementioned super-vampire.

The ball of white-hot plasma continued through said vampire and onwards, until it struck the outer wall, burning through it with barely a pause.

Seconds later, some few miles away, a large area of forest exploded into flame.

'Damn, child,' chuckled Karling. 'That was some serious game. Nice. Now don't just stand there admiring your work, do it again. Perhaps with a little more finesse this time.'

Shaun grinned and set up another two fireballs, one in each hand, then he began blasting away like an old-timey western gunslinger.

Bears and wolves dove for cover as the superheated balls of plasma careened across the battlefield, exploding and burning all in their paths.

Faylinn added to the destruction by sending blots of electricity crashing down on both BUMF's and *Nosferatu* alike.

Large areas of the castle were now aflame and the thump of grenades been thrown by the Knights and the Italian wolves added to the general mayhem.

Vampire bodies lay everywhere, some torn to pieces, some mere piles of smoldering flesh, as did many wolves, bears and Knights.

Troy and Emily were fighting in tandem as usual, their combined prowess enough to best any single BUMF, particularly when one of the bears, or a couple of wolves jumped in to help.

As they fought, Emily was pleased, and a little surprised, to note that they were winning. Despite the large number of Chernobyl super-vampires involved in the fray.

In fact, a quick estimate of the fallen showed the team of hunters had taken out around fifty BUMF's and twice as many *Nosferatu* and Grinders. However, almost half of the wolves were either dead or incapacitated, and three bears lay still on the ground.

As well as that, it was obvious Shaun was beginning to flag, his fiery attacks getting smaller and fewer, and Merlin was literally holding him up, such was the state of his physical exhaustion.

Tag had switched out his last box of ammo for missus Jones, and the rest of the Knights were likewise running low.

The Italian wolves had all assumed their wolven forms, as they were all out of ammo.

However, the team was still fighting as efficiently as they could, taking down the super-vamps one by one, concentrating their full attention on them as by now there were hardly any *Nosferatu*, Grinders or Familiars left alive.

'We need to find the Blood King,' shouted Emily to Troy as they put down yet another Monster. 'And soon, before we're all too exhausted to finish him.'

Before Troy could acknowledge her comment, a palpable wave of power rippled across the keep.

The feeling of authority and dominance was so powerful, it brought a dozen wolves and most of the Knights to their knees.

Emily looked up to see Belikov descending the steps, flanked by two more Chernobyl Monsters. All about him an ethereal glow of otherworldly power. And with it, a feeling of supreme benefaction.

'It's the power of the *Triginta*,' shouted Merlin. 'Troy, use your bond to strengthen the pack. Muller, reinforce your men's faith. Do it, now.'

Troy threw his head back and howled his dominance over the Pack, feeding them his Omega-level strength, pushing aside the power of the *Triginta* and shrugging off its hold on his wolves.

Muller drew his flask of Holy Water from his webbing and proceeded to sprinkle it over his Knights.

'*In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.'*

The blessed water hissed and spat as it made contact with the kneeling Knights, casting aside the hold of the artifact and restoring their faith and their conviction.

But Belikov's power also affected the remaining six super-vamps, energizing them to the extent they redoubled their efforts in a desperate attempt to please their king. Their savior. The holder of the *Triginta*.

And they fell upon the surviving hunters with a great and furious passion, caring not for their own lives. Instead looking only to serve their leader unto death.

Both Troy and Emily headed for the Blood King, but his two bodyguards engaged them as they approached. Both carried large, two-handed, six-foot long broadswords, that they handled like they were rapiers.

Emily fended her opponent off using her axe, Deathwalker. The two of them fought at lightning speed, sparks flying from their blades as they clashed, the sounds ringing out like hammer blows in a steel mill.

Troy relied on his titanium-hard claws, parrying and thrusting, constantly moving, jumping and rolling. But it was a battle hard fought, and he was already bleeding from a score of deep cuts. Of course, they were healing almost as fast as they were being delivered.

Almost.

At the same time, the rest of the team, sans Shaun who had passed out from overextending himself, kept on at the remaining half dozen BUMF's. Already they had whittled the number down to four, but in doing so had lost another three wolves and a bear.

They were winning.

Just.

But at best it looked like it would be a pyrrhic victory.

Troy went down under a flurry of blows from his adversary's broadsword, massive rents in his flesh and a slew of shattered ribs.

Emily spun fast, feinting high but switching at the last possible microsecond, sweeping Deathwalker low. The blade connected, lopping off both of the BUMF's legs just below the knee, dropping the Monster to the floor in a welter of blood.

A quick coup-de-gras left the super-vamp both legless and headless.

Then she turned to the Monster attacking Troy, catching it unawares as it concentrated on the Omega.

But as she moved forward, there was a blur of movement and she found herself flying through the air, blood spurting from a deep gash in her side.

In her peripheral vision she saw Belikov moving towards her, a single bladed axe in each hand. And even with her enhanced senses, he was moving so fast it was almost impossible to track him. Never before had she come up against anything so much faster than her. And judging from the blow he had dealt her; he was stronger as well.

She felt the wound in her side healing up as she moved backwards. Glancing across the keep, she noted there would be no help from the rest of the pack, or the mages, they were still busy fighting the remaining four super-vamps.

So, now she had to take on the Blood King himself, plus his bodyguard. And Troy was still lying in a pool of his own blood, bowed but not beaten. Emily knew he would be back on his feet in a matter of seconds.

However, seconds could last a lifetime at the speed the super-vamps were moving.

Emily moved as fast as she could, angling towards the bodyguard, hoping to take him out so she could concentrate on Belikov.

But for the first time, Emily knew she was outgunned. Not only was Belikov the acme of all of the Chernobyl Monsters, he was also enhanced by the almost complete *Triginta* he wore around his neck. Even though, it was obvious the artifact had taken its toll. His speed, agility and strength had seemingly increased, although his face was covered in suppurating, open sores, and his eyes bled tears of blood.

Emily swung her axe at the bodyguard, then leaped to the side and took a swipe at Belikov, struggling to keep both Monsters at bay.

As she moved a feeling of helplessness washed over her. An almost incontestable need to acquiesce. To fall to her knees and beg the Blood King for forgiveness.

'Fight it, Emily,' shouted Troy, his voice hoarse with pain. 'It's the *Triginta*. He's not that fast or strong, the artifact is making you think he is.'

Emily forced herself to reject the feelings of inadequacy and shame

that were flooding her senses, but it was difficult. She was possessed of an inordinate amount of mental power, but the *Triginta* was a two-thousand-year-old artifact that had been cursed by the Lord himself, and imbued with millennia of hatred and power and conquest.

Screaming in anguish, she staggered forward, desperately trying to swing Deathwalker.

Belikov smiled.

And his ruined face seemed to Emily to be the visage of an angel. The *Triginta* grasped her mind and bent it to its will. Cajoling her, tempting her. Enticing her.

Commanding her to be still. To accept her fate.

For who was she compared to the God-King that stood before her?

With tears running down her face, the Daywalker dropped her axe.

Belikov stepped towards her.

Raised his axes…

And grunted as a spearhead appeared seemingly magically from the center of his chest, punching through his heart and at the same time, severing the necklace, causing the silver sestertii to tumble to the floor.

Immediately, the *Triginta's* hold on Emily vanished.

She slid her foot under Deathwalker, flicked it up, and in one smooth motion, hammered the blades into the bodyguard's chest. Then with a twist, she ripped his heart out.

With the bodyguard out of the way, Emily could turn her full attention to Belikov.

She turned to face the Blood King, who was kneeling in front of her, a look of such surprise etched on his ruined face it was almost comical.

And behind him stood another Monster. In his hand the spear that had just been driven through Belikov's chest.

With another mighty underhand swing, Deathwalker entered Belikov's chest and continued upwards to explode through the top of his skull.

With a wet sucking sound, the bifurcated corpse fell to the floor.

Emily tilted her head to one side as she observed the Monster still standing motionless behind the fallen king.

'Why?' she asked.

The Monster shrugged. 'Many reasons, Daywalker,' he answered. 'But mainly because I simply couldn't stand by and watch this madman destroy our species. He would make an enemy of all mankind, and we know that would be an unwinnable battle.'

'Who are you?' asked Emily.

'Some call me, the Scholar,' answered Hadad.

'Tell me, Scholar,' enquired Emily. 'How did you alone manage to

resist the power of the *Triginta?*'

Hadad reached into his pocket and withdrew a small wooden snuff box. He opened it and took out a single silver coin, making sure he held it with a silk kerchief to prevent the silver from burning him.

Merlin walked up. 'Hadad,' he greeted the Monster.

'Wizard.'

'So, you had the last piece all along,' noted Merlin.

Hadad nodded.

'I suppose thanks are in order,' continued the Wizard.

But before Hadad could retort, a crackling sheet of lightning skittered across the keep.

Then a portal opened, and from it rolled wave after wave of power, followed by a figure clad in red, holding in its right hand, a spear formed from a thunderbolt. And in its left, a Warhammer cast from hellfire.

It was war in its truest form.

The ultimate warrior.

And it came for revenge.

'Morrigan,' roared Merlin as he threw a bolt of plasma at her.

But he was tired almost unto death, and the goddess of war shrugged his magiks off with barely an effort.

In turn, she replied by loosing a thunderbolt at the ancient wizard, catching him in the chest and blowing him off his feet and into the wall some fifty yards away.

Troy reared up, but was treated with as little respect as Merlin. The Morrigan swung her Warhammer and smashed the Omega to the floor with one savage blow.

Then, with a gesture, she swathed Emily in a coruscating web of thunderbolt power.

The Knights opened up, but they were all almost out of ammunition, and the paltry few rounds simply ricocheted off the Morrigan's magical shield.

The goddess of war had struck at the perfect moment, when all were at the end of their tethers, exhausted, battered and wounded. Out of ammunition and with no reserves left to draw upon.

It was a perfectly planned stroke of tactical genius.

But as the German Field Marshall, Helmuth von Moltke said back in 1850 *'No plan survives contact with the enemy'.*

Or as the boxer Mike Tyson paraphrased, *'Everyone has a plan, until they get punched in the mouth'.*

With a sound akin to a thousand waves crashing on a pebbled beach, another portal burst into existence on the right-hand side of the keep.

'Hey, you shuzzbutting pile of steaming poodle excrement,' roared a

voice. ‘Guess what, I’m back.’

‘As am I,’ added a second voice, the amplitude of the cry so loud as to shake the very foundations of the castle.

Let’s just say, we’re all here,’ added Latobias as he stepped out of the portal, followed by Belenas, Sirona and Grannus.

‘You dare to stand against me?’ shouted the Morrigan. ‘I am the goddess of war. You lot are little more than household gods at best.’

‘Maybe a short while ago,’ admitted Grannus. ‘But now, as the newly minted god of Bling. I got worshippers to spare.’

‘And I, you po-faced shagger of other people’s scurvy pets, am the god of depression. And let me tell you,’ continued Belenas. ‘I am up to my fudging neck in worshippers.’

‘I must admit,’ interjected Sirona. ‘I’m still in the startup phase of things at the moment. But watch this space, crow woman.’

‘You came,’ said Merlin, his voice barley above a whisper as he attempted to stand up.

‘Sure,’ agreed Grannus with a shrug. ‘Got bored, truth be told. And if I recall, I was never one to turn down a good fight. Particularly against this self-absorbed hag.’

‘Talk, talk, talk,’ scoffed the Morrigan as she unleashed barrage of thunderbolts at the collection of gods.

Latobias retaliated by throwing up a shield of raging wind. Belenas strode forward and swung his massive hammer at the Morrigan’s head.

She blocked the attack with her Warhammer, and the two weapons came together with a crash of thunder.

Sirona added to the chaos by superheating the snow around the Morrigan, in an attempt to blind her with the resulting cloud of steam.

The Morrigan fought back, surging forward, her weapons held ready.

Latobias whipped up a tornado that stopped her in her tracks as the winds approached two hundred miles an hour, shrieking like a racket of Banshees.

Then Grannus tagged her with a scorching blast of solar-light. The laser-like beam struck her on the left shoulder, burning so deeply she dropped her Warhammer, shrieking in agony.

Emily used the goddess’s momentary lack of situational awareness to step in, dredging up her last reserves of strength as she poured her essence into the axe known as Deathwalker.

The supernatural axe gifted her by Charon, the Ferryman.

Wielded before by the greatest axmen ever to have walked the multi-verse.

The blades sung their song of destruction and death as they glittered through the air. And Emily added her cry of anger and revenge and

retribution to the melody of the axe.

A discordant refrain that spoke of destruction.

Of devastation.

Of annihilation.

The blades struck the goddess at an oblique angle, smiting her neck just above her right shoulder, and continuing to cleave through her divine flesh and bone with the blaring sound of moral fury.

And as it did clove the goddess in twain, did the unrestrained and ferocious act of deicide shatter the immortal blade into mere shards of steel.

And the multiverse did cry out in loss. Bereft at the loss of its daughters.

The Triad that made the One.

Badb.

Macha.

Nemain.

Spouse of the Dagda. Goddess of war, and keeper of the spirit of the Emerald Isle.

And even though her end was both fitting and righteous, Emily's soul rebelled at the enormity of what she had just done.

She knew the goddess was trying to kill her.

She knew that time and power had corrupted the Morrigan to the point she was no longer a force for aught but evil.

All this she knew – yet still, to end a god is no small thing.

She staggered as exhaustion overcame her. But before she could fall, Tag was next to her. Holding her. Supporting her.

'Hey, girly,' he said softly. 'You done good.'

But if that were true, then why did she feel so bad?

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CHAPTER 50

Emily stood alone, looking out at the mountains in the distance.

All around her she could sense the sorrow of the Pack.

Ursula.

Armand.

Lorenzo.

Every Alpha, gone. Lost in the battle of Chernobyl.

And along with them, more than half the Pack.

Seven bears.

And three Holy Knights.

The combined European Pack now consisted of a mere dozen wolves, and their Omega.

It had been three days since the culmination of the battle.

The Prof, together with Karling and the dual-mage, Faylinn, had taken the *Triginta* to the land of the Fae. Ostensibly to destroy it.

The Hunters had left Hadad the scholar, to live on. He and the Blood King's once deputy, Jebe, the only vampire survivors of the devastating clash.

Troy had advocated killing them both, but Emily had forbidden it.

Enough killing. It was over.

She sensed someone walking up behind her.

Merlin.

The two of them stood together for a while.

In silence.

Finally, Merlin put his hand on the Shadowhunter's shoulder.

'Have you told him?' he asked.

Emily frowned. 'Told him what?'

Merlin raised an eyebrow. 'You know. Have you told him that you are leaving us?'

Emily turned to stare at the ancient wizard. 'How did you know? I haven't told anyone. Actually, until right now, I still hadn't decided.'

Merlin smiled. An expression full of great compassion. 'I am over two thousand years old, my girl,' answered Merlin. 'As they say, it's not my first rodeo.'

'He will think I no longer love him,' said Emily, her voice little more than a whisper.

'Do you?'

She nodded. 'Yes. No. Maybe. I'm not sure about anything anymore. Maybe that's the problem.'

Merlin took out his pipe and spent a minute filling it and bringing it to flame. Once he had a good burn going, he puffed a couple of times before he continued speaking.

'Over the millennia, I have made and lost more friends than I can remember,' he said. 'Hundreds. Many hundreds. And lovers. But how many times have I been in love? Truly in love?' He shrugged. 'I could count them on one hand.'

'What are you saying?' asked Emily. 'That I shouldn't go?'

Merlin chuckled. 'I am merely making an observation, my child,' he replied. 'What I am saying is, love lasts a very long time. True love, that is. And you, and young Troy, will hopefully still be alive for many centuries. Despite the power you both wield, the pressures you are under, and the responsibilities you have, you are but children in the scheme of things.

'Perhaps it is best for you to spend a little time alone. Or at least without us. Learn about yourself. The real you, not the Daywalker, the Shadowhunter, the Gargoyle Whisperer, the Pack member.

'Look for the young lady, not the invincible warrior. Spend time with her. Go shopping, do nothing, watch a movie, go to a nightclub. Because, in a hundred years time, we shall still all be here for you.'

'Even him?'

Merlin laughed. 'Perhaps. Perhaps not. But that in itself will answer a question. You need to define yourself as *who* you are – not *what* you are.'

'Will he hate me for it?'

Merlin shook his head. 'Never.'

'Can you tell him for me? Tell them all?'

'No,' answered Merlin. 'That is for you to do. They will understand. They are your friends, and more. Much more.'

Emily threw her arms around the ancient wizard and buried her head into his shoulder. 'Thank you,' she breathed.

'There is no need to thank me, Emily Hawk,' said Merlin. 'Now go and tell them your plans. I shall wait here, and after, Latobias will take you wherever you want.'

And so, Emily turned away and walked off to tell her friends she was leaving.

Daywalker, Shadowhunter, Pack member, Gargoyle Whisperer.

God Killer …

THE END

AUTHORS NOTE

Once again – thank you for reading. Is this the end? Perhaps. I felt

quite strongly that Emily deserved some time to be human. To do all of the things she missed out on. To find herself, and perhaps, even more.

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…to suffer is to live.

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As always – to my wife, Polly and my son, Axel. You chase the shadows from my soul.

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